



123
—シーキューブ—
CubexCursedxCurious
XI

水瀬葉月
Illustration なそりがため

電撃文庫

Cube×Cursed×Curious

C U b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



DC3
-シーキューブ-
Cube×Cursed×Curious

水瀬葉月

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C U b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

緋渡夕銘

フィアLOVEの
元気印な新入生。

「あー！
なんかヒラヒラキラキラとしてある！」

凄いではないか、

フィア

進級して晴れて先輩に
なりました。それを機に
とある素敵アイテムを
プレゼントされ気分は
上々？

千早

白穂LOVE?な不
良巫女の新入生。

「出店とかもあるし、なんか祭りっぽい雰囲気だな」

にんぎょうはらくろ
人形原黒絵
進級には縁のない
黒絵は相変わらず
のマイベースで周
囲を霍乱?

や ち はる あき
夜知春亮

2年生になっても周囲
の騒がしさは相変わら
ず。楽しさも気苦労も
ずっと続していく、そん
な日々です。

Scene01:花見の宴



「我ら第八十七騎士団が結団された目的は、
『騎士殺し』を撃滅することだ」

リリイハウル・
キルミスター

蒐集戦線騎士領の一級正道騎士。生真面目で高潔。とある人物を追って春亮たちの前に姿を現す。

Scene02:第八十七騎士団、来日。

復讐者ネトー

リリィハウルの部下。
下品な言い回しで喋
りまくる、SでもありM
でもある変態騎士。

鍵堂姫乃

大秋高校に入学した人
当たりのいい新入生。し
かしその正体は……？

「いいえ……頑張ります、から」「頑張ります、あたし。」

「ビハハ、カニサマが
見てますつてかあ。
犯しけツ穴だぜ」

魔法少女☆まじかる
いつくよーーー

インフェルのん!

むら まさ
村正このは

こ、これがこのは二年生バージョン!?
進級しても眞面目な性格ゆえの苦労が絶えません。

Scene03:白熱! ミスコン勝負!

ルービックキューブだ。
これを解く

うえの きりか
上野錐霞

春亮への恋心を解き放った錐霞に恐いものなし！ そしてクラス替えをしても委員長なのか？

「た
にやーん

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—シーキューブ—
CubexCursedxCurious

水瀬 葉月

Illustration さそりがため

Prologue

After finishing dinner, just as everyone was relaxing while enjoying some tea—

"Okay, Fear, why don't you sit down for a bit."

Haruaki coughed lightly and spoke with an especially serious expression.

Fear kept blinking repeatedly.

"I'm already sitting, you know?"

"Don't ask so many questions."

"Muu...?"

So watching television while sitting with her knees up was no good? As a result, Fear put down her knees with her thighs together and calves slanting outwards, turning to face the table again.

Apart from Haruaki, Konoha and Kuroe were also in the living room. These two girls were also sitting at the table, sipping tea. For some reason, Konoha did not seem quite pleased. On the other hand, Kuroe was spacing out as usual.

(Nunu... Although I don't get what's going on, I'm getting a sense of foreboding.)

Fear gulped hard. This... kind of atmosphere, could it be—

"H-Hold on! You guys are mistaken, you should carefully count again from the start!"

"Eh? Count again?"

"That's right! You must be mistaken if you're getting the impression that the rice cracker supply in the snack cupboard has fallen unnaturally. An illusion! It's absolutely not because the culprit tiptoed over in the middle of the night to steal a couple pieces to eat, overcome with hunger last night! I maintain that this you guys simply miscounted!"

"Ohoh... Figures. According to my calculations, the original amount should be enough to last for today, but since there's not much left, I had to go out and buy more rice crackers. Now the mystery is solved."

"L-Like I said, it's your illusion! Basically that... You simply miscounted!"

How odd. Judging from Haruaki's reaction, the crime was not about her theft of rice crackers?

In that case—

"...Oh! I-I know, it must be that! Earlier on a walk, I ran into Taizou by chance and he asked me: 'Did anything interesting happen lately?' Speaking of the funniest thing recently, isn't that 'how Cow Tits clumsily washes that pair of giant tits in bath,' so I explained to him in absolute detail without reservation, telling him everything I knew—"

Instantly, Konoha spurted tea violently.

"Buhu! Cough... Hold on, what nonsense have you done now!?"

"I-I didn't think there was anything wrong with telling others about that. Rather, this is the No.1 weird action that needs to be publicized to the world! I even demonstrated the motions to him. Imagining a sagging luffa fruit, then doing this, throwing it behind your neck when washing the inner side..."

"Hawawawawa! Lies, I've never done anything to that extent, Haruaki-kun! I do lift it up slightly, but I absolutely do not wish for you to get any impression of luffa fruits or sagging!"

"Uh, why are you telling me?"

"Okay okay, Kono-san, in terms of sagging, this is total victory for us of the Ladylike Bosoms Alliance who will never ever sag! Anyway, let's first wipe the tea away."

Kuroe began to use a cloth to wipe the tea that Konoha had spurted out. If that was not the issue, then the only remaining one was—

"So... Could it be that? Although it was just on a whim, I guess I really am at fault for doing it without asking permission. Kuroe, about that, I'll apologize to you honestly."

"Oh? What did you do to me?"

"There was one time after taking a bath when I tried out your panties in the changing area. Is that what you guys are asking about? Because the shape was quite weird, so I couldn't help my curiosity, and..."

"Oh~ That one? Muhu, how did you find it?"

"Just like its appearance, the sensation of wearing it is totally weird. What's the point of that design? So flimsy and gets buried in there, plus for some reason, it fully exposes the most critical spot—"

"Yes yes, allow me to tell you! That's basically... Mugumuga!"

"I-Immorality Breaker (Verbal Variant)!"

"Oh~ Stop it, you girls, the conversation isn't making any progress at all... Anyway, I'll just take this out directly."

Haruaki sighed in exasperation then took out a box from behind him and placed it on the table. It was a box roughly the size of a lunchbox.

"What is it?"

"How should I put it? It's something we were thinking it was about time for you to have. Things will definitely be more convenient with this. Since tomorrow is an important milestone in life, it's not an exaggeration to say the timing is just right... The three of us are in consensus."

"...I don't get you at all. Timing?"

"Anyway, you'll understand once you open it."

Tomorrow. Was anything happening tomorrow? —School was starting. That was all Fear could think of. The spring break was ending today. Did that count as an important milestone in life? However, come to think of it, Fear did feel that apart from the long vacation, there seemed to be some other significance.

Tilting her head, Fear ripped off the wrapping paper around the box. After seeing what was inside, she stared in surprise with her mouth gaping. Looking up forcefully in disbelief, she saw Haruaki's wry smile. After hearing the words he delivered in embarrassment next, Fear finally recalled the significance symbolized by the day of tomorrow.

"Anyway, let me say this... Fear, congratulations for promoting to the second year of high school. This is your promotion present. Treasure it well."

The next day—It was the morning of the first day of school ever since April arrived.

Together with Fear and Konoha, Haruaki was walking along the familiar path he had taken for the past year.

"Fufu. Somehow it feels like even this road's atmosphere is especially different today! Is it because we advanced to the second year!?"

"Really? This path to school is still the same as always."

"Hmph, obviously a crude and massive object cannot sense it, being too dense to understand the profound intricacies of the human heart. Hey Haruaki, what do you think?"

"Oh~ Now that you mention it, you're right. Perhaps it's due to all these students we've never seen before. Some of them are probably new students who started walking along this path for the first time today."

At Taishyuu High where Haruaki and his friends attended, the entrance ceremony took place on the same day as the opening ceremony. After the opening ceremony was held with the current students, the new students were invited into the venue for the entrance and the meet-and-greet ceremonies. During the opening ceremony, the new students would have their first homeroom meeting in their classrooms, which was why they had to arrive at school at the same time. Scattered about all over the place, these unfamiliar students dressed in new uniforms were probably all new freshmen.

"It's not like I cannot understand that aspect. But speaking of Fear-san, I believe she is simply getting carried away."

"Don't be ridiculous, I'm just the same as usual, not carried away at all.. Muu!?"

At this moment, Fear's gaze moved swiftly and instantly locked onto a certain spot.

"Ohoh... So furry, I've discovered the first furry animal after starting second year!"

"Oh, it's a cat. But if you go up to pet it, we'll be late."

"Pet it? Hmph... Having advanced to second year, I'm no longer the same. I was thinking of striking as soon as an opportunity arose, but didn't expect one to come along so soon! Simply stroking fur for a moment can no longer satisfy me anymore. Tremble before me now, for I have now obtained a method to preserve that furry feeling for eternity...!"

While boasting with exaggeration, Fear slowly approached the cat that was yawning on a wall. Of course, held in her hand was the present Haruaki, Konoha and Kuroe had given her yesterday—a cellphone.

Although Fear's school life had started in the middle of the second term, throughout the first year, she had worked hard towards familiarizing herself with the environment. Together with Konoha and Kuroe, Haruaki had decided to give Fear a promotion present that was also meant as a prize for effort. Although it was not one of the latest models, the cellphone they picked did have a camera and other basic functions. As for methods of usage, Fear had probably asked Kuroe to teach her last night already.

"Eh, but in my view, she is totally getting carried away..."

"I agree, but starting out like this cannot be helped. We'll just have to watch her patiently."

Fear was excitedly snapping away like mad, taking sexy shots of the cat licking its own crotch. Haruaki smiled wryly while staring at the back of her head. Ultimately, Fear was still herself. Even after advancing to second year, her exuberant personality was not going to change overnight.

(Yeah, it's the same with everyone.)

No matter what changed or did not change, there was still a long way to go for the rest of their lives. In any case, let's maintain the current pace and enjoy the second year of high school in leisure—Haruaki thought.

Just as they were a short distance away from school, they recognized someone familiar.

"Oh Kirika! Good morning! Bonjour, second years!"

"How should I say this? What a strange greeting coming from you. Good morning, Fear-kun, Konoha-kun... And Yachi."

"Good morning, Ueno-san."

"G-Good morning."

The instant he saw Kirika, Haruaki felt his heart rate rise slightly.

Because he recalled what happened on Valentine's Day.

On the roof, Kirika had given him chocolate while saying it was "not out of courtesy."

Of course, his mind was instantly sent into turmoil. Although he pretended to be calm in front of Fear and the others, his mind was actually so chaotic that he could not even sleep at night. If not out of courtesy, then what significance did the chocolate carry? No, but it's coming from Class Rep, after all. Impossible. But, what if... No no, impossible. Class Rep sees me as a member of the opposite sex? There must be some mistake there. But if there's no mistake... This continued endlessly until morning. In order to cook breakfast, Haruaki had sluggishly pushed his sleep-deprived brain out of bed then absentmindedly switched on the television—

Then a certain term jumped into his ears.

"Friendship chocolate."

Apparently, this new custom had started for the occasion of Valentine's Day in recent years.

Haruaki instantly felt his worries being swept clear. He originally thought that Valentine gifts were either out of courtesy or romance, but this was already an outdated mode of thinking. Thinking from Kirika's standpoint, it made total sense. Given her rigid personality, surely she must be thinking: If I call it courtesy chocolate, then that gives the impression that "I'm only giving this to you out of courtesy," which would be too impolite. To prevent that from happening, she was giving him chocolate for a milder reason of "because we're friends." She must have said what she said out of kindness. The mystery was completely solved!

Having reached this revelation, on the day of March 14, White Day, which was several days prior to the third school term's closing ceremony, Haruaki made sure to give Kirika a boxed set of confectionery, with the same contents as what he had given Fear and the others as return gifts.

He believed this was the correct interpretation. Kirika had simply thanked him, saying "Th-Thank you" and accepted the return gift without any other special reaction. So it was just as he had thought. If, supposing the chocolate she had given him carried some special significance, surely she would have expressed a different reaction, right?

Oh dear~ How wonderful, I didn't misunderstand or say anything weird, thank goodness. Breathing a sigh of relief, Haruaki had gone into the spring break like that, moving on until now.

Seeing Kirika, Haruaki could not help but recall the heart racing feeling from back then. In other words, the sort of strange awareness stemming from his initial misconception, the feeling of being made aware again of Kirika as a member of the opposite sex.

No no no, I already concluded that was overthinking things. Stop beating so fast, my heart! Just as he warned himself—

"...Hmm~ Somehow it seems like Haruaki-kun and Ueno-san have been acting strange from a while ago... Could it be that something happened between the two of you?"

"K-Konoha, what are you talking about. There's nothing, nothing at all. Hahaha."

"Is that so...? It would be best if that were true... Hmm~"

Feeling Konoha's half-narrowed eyes staring at his back, Haruaki finally recovered his presence of mind.

"Sorry, Class Rep. Fear's emotions are especially excited today, so please don't mind her."

Until he spoke up, Kirika's expression looked a bit tense—This was surely his imagination. With her usual, calm and steady smile, Kirika replied:

"Hoho, I can tell. She looks very happy, because of advancing to the second year."

"Not only that~! Kirika, look at this! It's a double dose of pleasant surprises!"

Suddenly slipping between Haruaki and Kirika, Fear raised her cellphone before Kirika's eyes.

"Hmm, that's really a cute cat... Say, is this actually your cellphone, Fear-kun?"

"Exactly! Mufufu, finally, I've joined the club of cellphone owners like you guys. Now I can run along on the forefront of the times and civilization...!"

"Although you're blowing this out of proportion, it's just a promotion present. My position is that it's unnecessary but since Haruaki-kun and Kuroe-san asked, I still prepared it."

"Well, with this, I don't have to worry so much that you'll get lost or when you go out for walks on your own. By the way, Fear, not just ours, you should also enter Class Rep's phone number."

"Oh of course. What's that called? I remember Kuroe teaching me yesterday... Right, the beam! Kirika, let's fire our beams at each other to enter our numbers!"

"I guessing you're referring to the infra-red transfer? What an original way of calling it... Of course it's fine. But we're going to be late if we dally too long. Let's transfer while we're walking."

Fear and Kirika placed their cellphones together and started to walk side by side. Haruaki and Konoha also followed after them leisurely. Soon, the group reached the school.

The mood at the school gates was different from usual. Students dressed in brand new uniforms with anticipation and unease written on their faces passed through the gates successively. Unused to the sight of the petite silver-haired girl, new students gazed at her with curiosity and puzzlement. This felt quite refreshing as well.

Then just as they walked into the school's confines, Haruaki suddenly felt a sense of dissonance. The mood was different from outside of school. All the students seem to be noticing the same thing.

Then what exactly was it? —Haruaki casually turned his gaze towards a particular direction which looked like "something" was attracting the students' concerns. In the next instant, he saw a festive display of the colors red and white.

"What——!?"

"...Oh dear~? Please allow me to say with fear and trepidation, everyone, it's been so long~ Also, good morning~"

There was a shrine maiden in school.

With a red hakama plus a white kimono jacket, it was completely a shrine maiden's outfit. With an endearing smile combined with black hair and pale skin, the girl was sweeping the floor with a rustling bamboo broom. Inside a school, this was a most bizarre scene to behold.

"Aren't you Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two!?"

"I-Isuzu—? Why are you here?"

During the New Year's first shrine visit back on New Year's Day, they had gotten to know Isuzu due to a certain commotion. Currently, she simply tilted her head while continuing to smile pleasantly. Seeing that, Haruaki frowned.

"I-Isuzu...? What's with you?"

"Oh, you'd like to speak with Isuzu, yes~? Understood, please wait for a moment~"

Holding her broom under her arm, the shrine maiden freed both hands and cupped them behind her ears. Then half-closing her eyes and swaying her head for a while, she stopped moving.

"Probably because there are too many people, the sound is having trouble connecting~ Hmm~ Ho! Ah..."

The shrine maiden murmured to herself, repeatedly adjusting the angle of her head's tilt then holding it or turning her hands behind her ears. How should one describe it? The movements were as suspicious as someone trying to receive weird electromagnetic signals from outer space.

Just as Haruaki was starting to find the stares of the surrounding crowd unbearable, a nearby bush shook.

"Uwah, she appeared! Another one!"

An identical face suddenly emerged from the bush. This shrine maiden was also holding a broom, smiling pleasantly without saying a word. The first shrine maiden proceeded to approach the second shrine maiden swiftly.

"So it's like this. Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, I am Nisuzu~ I have already called Isuzu out, so please go ahead and speak if you have something to tell her~ However, please allow me to do a transfer for this purpose~"

Smiling and staring into each other's eyes, the two identical shrine maidens leaned towards each other, looking as though they were carved from the same mold. The hems of their shrine maiden outfits rubbed together, their hakamas pressed against each other, their bosoms were also pushed together, but still they kept shrinking their distance, until their

noses were almost touching, even the two shrine maiden's lips were coming together—

"What are you two doing!? That's too indent!" "Th-This is a school! Absolutely ridiculous!"

Konoha and Kirika frantically rushed at the two shrine maidens and pulled them apart.

"Please allow me to explain in fear and trepidation. Just as you all know, we only have one voice to share among us~ For a change of pace, today it is Nisuzu's turn to speak, so if you would like to talk to Isuzu, I must transfer the voice to her~"

Now that she mentioned it, that was quite true. As the set of "cursed kagura bells" whose bells could not ring, only one bell was able to speak at a time after taking half of the owner's voice.

"Even so, you don't have to kiss in this kind of place..."

"Of course there are other methods~ Would it be better if Isuzu turned back into a bell then I transfer the voice to her~?"

"Then when she turns back to human, she'll be completely naked, right? That's even worse!"

"Jeez, that's enough, you're all pretty much the same anyway. There's no difference even if we talk to you... Anyway, why are you here!?"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, even if you ask me why~..."

Just at this moment, a voice came from behind the group.

"I forgot to mention, after the ceremony, don't you go running about. You must stay in place and wait obediently. Also, I don't think I need to say this, but if you dare come in to watch the entrance ceremony and attract attention, I will pinch you mercilessly afterwards, prepare yourself... Oh!"

Haruaki looked back to find a girl standing there. A hoarse and deep voice, along with glasses giving off a smart impression. Like the new students in the surroundings, she was dressed in a brand new uniform of this school's—Due to seeing her in this uniform for the first time, it was quite a refreshing impression. Haruaki had seen her in a sailor-style middle school uniform before.

"Shameless Shrine Maiden Number One! Nunu, seeing you dressed like this... Really? You got into this school too!"

"Yes, considering Isuzu-san and Nisuzu-san's appearances here, it is only to be expected. It was mentioned previously that they cannot stray too far away from Chihaya-san. It's exactly as Chihaya-san told us back in January."

"Right, I heard you mention it that time when you brought vegetables for us. Hmm, anyway, let me congratulate you on getting in."

"What... Guh... You guys..."

The girl—the owner of Isuzu and the bells, Chihaya—wrapped her arms around herself and retreated. Probably due to being seen in uniform, she was blushing in embarrassment. Next, she scowled as though to hide her embarrassment and sighed obviously.

"...Sigh~ What a poor omen, to think I'd run into you guys immediately..."



"Attending the same school, it'd be weird not to encounter one another. Besides, given the connection of shrine maidens who could not be more conspicuous, meeting up is absolutely inevitable. So, why are they holding brooms and sweeping the school?"

"I'm not obliged to tell you, great pervert. I only came here to remind Nisuzu... although Isuzu is here as well, anyway, I'm reminding her she's not allowed to watch the entrance ceremony. In any case... That's that. So—"

Chihaya's gaze glanced from side to side. "Oh." Realizing something, Konoha said:

"If you're looking for Shiraho-san, she's not here. We don't usually come to school together."

"What!? I-I didn't even say anything, what the heck are you talking about!? Totally nonsensical! Anyway, I've no interest in chatting with you guys, so bye—"

"Nunu, speaking of the devil, the devil's here! Hey~ Shiraho and Sovereignty! Hurry up and let's fire beams at each other, right now!"

There was another uproar in the surrounding crowd. Haruaki's unusual group was currently positioned in the crowd along the path between the gates and the school building's entrance. Now, further exotic elements were added—in other words, a maid and a beautiful girl.

"To think that the first day of the school year would be so inauspicious, I'll just pretend I didn't hear anything. I seem to remember the horoscope this morning did mention that today's lucky action is «Ignore». Correction, it absolutely did say that."

"Ahaha~ Shiraho, since it's the first day, you really should say your greetings properly! So, good morning, Fear-chan! Ohohohoh, what's going on? Is that a cellphone? Kyah, Fear-chan, you can finally contact me on and off every single night! Of course we need to fire the beam!"

Shiraho glanced sideways at Sovereignty who was chatting happily and excitedly with Fear, meanwhile sighing with her shoulders slumped. At this moment, she finally noticed someone unexpected was present at the scene.

"Oh dear... You."

"Ah! Umm—H-Hello."

Under Shiraho's gaze, Chihaya reacted completely different compared to the way she treated Haruaki's group. Shrinking her shoulders awkwardly, she bowed her head lightly. Shiraho's lips curled slightly.

"I see you've enrolled at this school. Honestly speaking, I don't find it a particularly wise choice, but it's a little too late for that. Just be as careful as you can and don't fall victim to that perverted human or the gas mask freak... By the way, why are those shrine maidens here? Judging by appearance, they probably aren't students, are they?"

"Oh, umm—They're janitors!"

Chihaya answered immediately. Her attitude remained completely opposite when in front of Shiraho.

"After the exam, this school's superintendent phoned me, saying that he knew the whole story. Since Isuzu and the others cannot separate too far from me, I had them hide on campus back in middle school. But the superintendent suggested that instead of doing that, why not have them be present in school legitimately..."

"So it's that freak's idea. I've said it many times already, you would do best to be more careful."

"Yes, I will be careful." Chihaya nodded obediently in acknowledgement but then she noticed that the smiles on the shrine maidens' face seemed to have doubled in radiance.

"Ufu~fu~ Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, Nisuzu is so delighted that Chihaya-sama is so happy~"

"...(nodding nodding)"

"Isuzu says she feels the same way too~ Sakuramairi Shiraho-sama, please continue to talk more with Chihaya-sama from now on. Words cannot express our gratitude! Do know that Chihaya-sama is extremely... umm... towards you, Sakuramairi Shiraho-sama... Ouch, this really hurts~?"

"Giving you deathly pain is the point! Stop talking unnecessary rubbish!"

Flushed red in the face, Chihaya pinched Nisuzu and Isuzu's faces upwards together. Their relationship seemed to be the same as usual. Haruaki shrugged and said:

"Anyway, the superintendent hired them as janitors, right... How considerate of him. But it shouldn't be necessary for them to split up, right? After all, she already attracts a lot of attention."

"Really~? A janitor's job is supposed to clean the campus, so the more people we have as janitors, the cleaner we can sweep everywhere, right~? As long as nobody sees all fifteen of us gathered in one place, I don't think there's a problem in explaining that we're twins, triplets or quintuplets~"

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to settle on your cover story and decide first on how many sisters you have...?"

"By the way, as long as you don't dress as shrine maidens, I think you'll attract much less attention to a certain extent."

Konoha and Kirika expressed their respective opinions in exasperation. Still smiling pleasantly, Nisuzu answered:

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, the shrine maiden outfit is like a uniform for us~ Also, a very practical issue is that we don't have any other clothes apart from shrine maiden outfits~"

In that case, it could not be helped... Right? Haruaki knew that buying clothes for all fifteen of them would be a huge expense. Still, he hoped that they could purchase some gradually from now on.

At this moment, Fear had finished exchanging phone numbers with Sovereignty and walked over.

"By the way, Chihaya, how's your mother lately?"

"Eh? Hmm... Although she can't be discharged immediately, she seems like she's recovering bit by bit. Y-You don't need to worry about this matter."

"I don't agree with that. The vegetables you and your mother planted were very tasty. We have to thank her later. Yes, it's great that she's fine. I hope she can leave the hospital soon."

"Ah... Ooh..." Chihaya's lips moved in confusion. It looked like Fear's smile and words were too direct, rendering Chihaya unable to respond suitably for the moment.

In the end, Chihaya yelled one-sidedly at Nisuzu and Isuzu: "Argh, jeez! Anyway, that's it! You girls have to do your job properly!" while fleeing towards the shoe lockers. "Oh, I've got to get going to! Bye bye~" Next, Sovereignty frantically twirled her body, clad in the maid uniform, and ran towards her workplace. Miraculously, Sovereignty did not fall over. In other words, she did not provide the service of an upskirt view to the new first-year students who were staring speechlessly at the maid who was just as exotic as shrine maidens in school. Had Sovereignty really slipped and fell, then these new students, looking forward to a bright future filled with hope, probably would have suffered a hellish scene where Shiraho poked their eyes blind one by one. Utterly horrifying.

"So, we'd better get going too."

Haruaki said without thinking. Hearing him, Konoha pushed her glasses and for some reason, her eyes flashed forcefully with solemn light as she whispered:

"...Are we really going? Really... Finally... We have to go over...!"

"Uh, we don't have a choice, right? Why are you so fired up?"

"Haruaki-kun, don't you understand? This is a matter of great importance, to the point that one cannot even mention it lightly. I believe everyone deliberately avoided bringing it up until now."

"What are you talking about? Did your nutrients finally get absorbed completely by your boobs creature and failed to reach your brain? No, perhaps the person speaking now is not Cow Tits but the giant boobs themselves!?"

"Saying utter nonsense again... Ueno-san, you've already realized, right?"

Walking towards the shoe lockers, Kirika answered with eyes as serious as Konoha's:

"Of course. This is an extremely crucial element that will determine an entire year's developments henceforth. It is waiting for us ahead—Namely, class adjustments."

Fear's footsteps stopped abruptly as she looked up in trepidation.

"Hold on, let me confirm this. No way... No way—After promoting to the second year, umm... The class membership will be different from the first year...?"

"You've never heard of the concept of class adjustments? Of course, that's how it goes."

"What!? T-Tell me earlier about this kind of thing! Bad... This is very bad! Of course, it's not like I have to be together with a certain someone, or there's someone I want to be in the same class with... No, wait, there is! I still want to be in the same class as Kirika, Kana and the others, but there's a total of six classes in a year group, so the probability is only one out of six... Oh no, that's terrible, the probability is so depressing...!"

Fear's face was instantly filled with abject gloom.

"This doesn't even matter at all. If possible, I'd like to enter the totally nonexistent Class 7 all alone."

Shiraho coldly left these words behind while advancing swiftly. Kirika and Konoha exuded nervousness while Fear dragged her feet while following glumly.

Haruaki walked at the tail of the group, his head tilted in puzzlement:

(Hmm~ Why is everyone acting like it's an important contest where their lives are at stake? Hold it, speaking of which, have I told these girls about that...?)

While he was thinking, the group arrived at the school building's entrance. A large poster was put up next to it where countless students formed a human wall. Students could be heard yelling loudly in rapid succession, exhibiting a wide range of emotions from happy to sad.

"Although it's absolutely ridiculous, I am even willing to resort to fortune telling for a time like this... So...!"

"I tasted despair last year already. Having endured a year already, this year... This year must...!"

Haruaki also tiptoed to look at the poster of class lists, searching for his name... Then he soon found it in Year 2 Class 1. There were also many familiar names in the class.

"Th-Thank goodness...!" "~~~~!"

Kirika breathed a forceful sigh of relief while Konoha turned around without saying a word, repeatedly clenching her fist to make a "Yes!" gesture. Just as Haruaki was puzzling why Fear had no reaction, she finally stopped tiptoeing and lowered herself, then turning her head around in an exaggerated manner, she spoke with a shocked expression:

"...My name is listed under Class 1."

"What a coincidence, me too."

"Muhu... R-Really? Really really~ Come to think of it, the days of suffering the shameless brat's various surveillance every day are starting up again. How troubling. I'd have such a relaxing time if we could be in different classes. But being in the same class means I shove a lot of miscellaneous stuff on you, yes, it's not like it's totally unbearable for me!"

Instantly, Fear became inexplicably energetic. Haruaki smiled wryly while Konoha continued to be clenching her fist nonstop as though going "Yes! Yes!", so he turned to Kirika.

"Same for you, Class Rep, we're in the same class again. That's wonderful."

Kirika stared at him intently with a serious expression.

"...Do you honestly think this is wonderful?"

"O-Of course."

Although he had no idea why she asked him to confirm, of course he only had one answer. After hearing this answer, Kirika finally smiled radiantly.

"Me too... Seriously... That's wonderful. I'm so glad and what a relief. Seriously."

Her smile caused Haruaki's heart rate to rise for a while uncontrollably. It was a very attractive smile, one that he found adorable from the depths of his heart.

Haruaki consciously tried to suppress his quickened heart beat and looked at the class lists again, hence discovering the name of another person present. Nevertheless, her reaction was completely different from Fear and the other girls.

In other words, Shiraho simply murmured briefly amidst sighs:

"—How utterly terrible."

Slightly earlier—Hayakawa Chihaya was changing into her indoor shoes at the shoe lockers of her class after confirming her class at the poster, thinking to herself: What will it be like, walking into a high school first-year classroom for the first time?

She had no expectations and harbored no hopes. Social skills were not her strength. Besides, this was even more of a special situation. Chihaya was in a sour mood simply at the thought of the upcoming self-introduction time and the gazes of classmates curious about her hoarse voice. I must do my best to make friends sooner—Naturally, she did not harbor such lofty goals, but she hoped to avoid making enemies at least. In any case, she was going to try hard to spend the day quietly, trying her best not to attract attention, trying her best to avoid talking to people or letting people talk to her—

"Hey hey! I've got something to ask you!"

Her goal suddenly did not seem optimistic. A girl was clumsily stuffing her shoes into a locker in the same area while striking up conversation with glimmering eyes. The girl was very tall but her cute face relieved much of the intimidating pressure from her height.

"...Who are you?"

"I guess I haven't told you yet, I am Hiwatari Yume! Nice meeting you today, let's get along from now on!"

To match the greeting, the girl saluted vigorously with a grin all over her face. Chihaya had never heard this name before. Due to the girl's friendly attitude, Chihaya wondered at one point whether they had graduated from the same middle school, but that was apparently not the case. Simply a fool who had no concept of personal space and separation—Chihaya concluded and quickly had this Yume girl's personality pegged.

"So, dear classmate, you know the super explosively cute little girl who was chatting with you just now? Are you friends? Or sisters separated since birth? Or roommates living together in the same girls' dorm?"

The girl talked very much in the style of the athletically inclined. Ignoring the girl was probably fine, but seeing the girl unconcerned about her

hoarse voice, Chihaya decided to reward her by answering a few questions.

"Hmm... We do know each other. What about her?"

"Oh my~ I'm so jealous... Honestly, it's like explosively love at first sight! I wanna get close to her, wanna talk to her, wanna start a fan club for her! If there's a chance next time, please, you must introduce me to her! I beg you!"

The girl clapped her hands together and worshiped Chihaya, bewildering her. That silver-haired girl's level was completely beyond that of beauties commonly seen on the street. As a girl, admiring her was only natural. But to be honest, Chihaya did not want to go around publicizing this. Being acquainted with that girl and able to converse with her, it was true that Chihaya felt a sense of superiority to some extent.

"But she doesn't like this kind of thing."

"Please help, I beg you! I really wanna hold her tight! I wanna stroke her head!"

Chihaya frowned.

"Come on... She's essentially our senior. She'll get mad, you know."

"But but, don't you feel that she gives off a feeling that makes you really wanna hug her tight? If a plushie like her really existed, I'll surely buy the plushie and sleep with it! Don't you feel the same?"

"Nope."

"No way~ But this is surely what most people would feel, I won't back down at all! Lemme try asking for other opinions. Uh~ Hello there, what do you think?"

Yume suddenly struck up conversation with a nearby student who was using a shoe locker in the same area. Seeing Yume's friendly attitude, the student was probably struck by the same doubts that Chihaya had felt.

"Uh... May I ask who are you? Have we met before?"

"Probably not! About to become your classmate, Hiwatari Yume is pleased to meet you!"

Yume made another vigorous salute. Chihaya had noticed for a while that she made many useless movements. It was probably her habit.

"So, about that person who was outside just now, I wanted to ask if a plushie like her existed, would you want it!?"

"Oh, we really are meeting for the first time... Uh, I'm Kagidou Himeno. Sorry, I'm not quite sure who you're talking about. Who are you referring to?"

The girl calling herself Himeno turned her face to the side, smiling wryly. Although there were no striking features, her cute face was above average. Undoubtedly one that would be quite popular with the boys.

"No way! How nervous were you on the way to school if you failed to notice that girl!"

"Ahaha, yeah, sorry. Because it's my first time being a high school student, it feels so nervous."

"It should be the first time for most people."

Chihaya lightly exhaled and walked towards her classroom. Naturally, the other two followed.

"Umm... May I walk with you? I'm afraid I'll get lost on my own."

"I don't mind."

"Wait for me! The conversation's not over—Uh... What were we talking about?"

"Asking me to introduce you and something about a plushie. Although it's none of my business, I find her more of a doll than a plushie. Because she's too beautiful, I wouldn't even dare dream of touching her. It feels more suitable to put her up as decoration for admiring."

"Eh~? Hmm, true, that long and shiny hair is so pretty... But her petite figure and rambunctiousness makes her feel more like something meant to be hugged!"

Not working. Chihaya narrowed her eyes. She somehow got the feeling that their conversation was impossible to connect.

"Umm... Let me quickly confirm. Who are you talking about again?"

"Of course the person who was just talking to you, with the long silver hair, petite build, with the unimaginably otherworldly cute looks! Are you finally willing to introduce me?"

Not caring about this from the bottom of her heart, Chihaya gave a noncommittal reply:

"...If there's a chance. Rubbing her face or kissing her, do whatever you want."

In terms of timetables, the first period was the opening ceremony, but after that, there was still a homeroom meeting lasting roughly ten minutes.

This was classroom of Year 2 Class 1 that they were going to be spending the next entire year. Haruaki surveyed all directions inconspicuously.

To be honest, there were many familiar faces. Unusually many. Fear, Konoha, Kirika, Taizou and Kana. Shiraho. Plus the gray-haired dark-skinned girl, Un Izoey. Even—

"My name is Kaidou Imi, in charge of Physical and Health Education. This is my first time taking on the role as the homeroom teacher, so I am certain there are sure to be many inadequacies. If you have any requests or suggestions for improvement, students, please be upfront with your opinions. Also, here is our assistant homeroom teacher, the newly hired Sagisaki-sensei, responsible for teaching English. Sagisaki-sensei, please go ahead and greet the class."

Standing behind the lectern, sweeping her gaze across the students, wearing a bright red tracksuit, a scar on her face, definitely problematic in terms of education but no one dared to criticize, carrying a metal shovel on her shoulder, was the "Scoop Teacher", Scottie-sensei. On the other hand, the assistant homeroom teacher was a woman wearing thick spectacles who looked quite timid and cowardly. She was currently introducing herself in a quiet voice in trepidation.

(Hmm... No matter how you look at it, we were all intentionally assigned to the same class...!)

Troublesome humans and those non-human girls. Indeed, in accordance with a certain someone's will and intentions, they were all assigned to this class. There was probably only one reason. With this, it was probably easier to keep an eye on everyone at the same time.

As for the identity of that certain someone, Haruaki could only think of one person. Namely, the superintendent.

Haruaki had forgotten to tell Fear and the others... During spring break, while making a phone call to greet and chat, the superintendent had said: "Just leave things to me regarding class adjustments. I won't disappoint you guys, hohoho." At the time, Haruaki was thinking that at most, he would be placed in the same class as Fear who would be quite worrying to leave alone unsupervised. Never did he expect to have everyone, who knew about the truth of cursed tools, all gathered together.

This allowed them to instantly react and cover things up if anyone did anything strange. It was good in this regard. On the other hand, this class was definitely going to be way too chaotic. Too many weird characters were definitely gathered together.

How troubling—Haruaki exhaled.

For the next twelve months—

Were they going to be able to enjoy peaceful days for their second year in high school—?

Chapter 1 - Spring Scene / Overhead View Above the Shrine Maidens / "Welcome, cherry-blossom utopia"

Part 1

After ending the first day of classes upon promoting to Year 2, Kirika returned to her apartment, put down her schoolbag and went into her room, intending to get changed. Just as her bed entered into view, she was attacked by a sudden impulse. Unable to resist the impulse, she pounced on the bed directly without changing out of her uniform.

"Gu, oh, guohhhhhh...! U-Unmistakable...!"

Kirika buried her face in her pillow, smacking her palm repeatedly against the mattress like an attorney protesting against an excessively inhumane verdict. In actual fact, there was plenty she wanted to protest about. Judge, what the heck is going on!? Judge, why could something so outrageous happen?

For a full month after February 14, her heart was about to explode out of her chest. After the ominous premonition left behind on White Day, the depressing rolling around of spring break, plus today's reaction, everything was confirmed.

That boy... That boy! Unmistakable!

"H-He must have gotten the mistaken idea that it's something like friendship chocolate... H-How absolutely ridiculous...!"

Wrong. Although I said it wasn't courtesy chocolate, you reached the wrong conclusion. Interpret my message more directly! Besides, wasn't friendship chocolate meant to be given between girls? He should have considered that I'm giving him chocolate with deeper significance than courtesy, right? In fact, that was precisely the truth, so why did he stop at "friendship"? Why didn't he think deeper about the meaning? All things considered, I can only conclude that inside that guy's mind, the concept of putting me under "that category" doesn't exist perhaps—

"Ooh, oohhh..."

She knew very well, but his density had far surpassed her expectation. Since "her heart's desire" was a possible interpretation, why couldn't he

pay her more attention? With that, she could use this as the impetus to take further action...!

Then should she spell it out to him one more time? Spell out for him the chocolate's significance? Absolutely ridiculous. She had already missed her chance too long. In that case, it was probably better to confess to him again. But even if she planned to do so, judging from the current situation, it would only put him in confusion. She did not think she would get a satisfactory response.

"...Because I have already decided to fight..."

Even if defeat was the end result, even if the chances of defeat were very high...

As long as there was a one in ten thousand chance of victory—She wanted to take a gamble. She was going to do everything she could to increase her odds of winning, biding her time, making the most of her paltry strength, then enter the stage to participate in battle. If she did not do that, this would not be a fight but merely a throwaway match.

Presumably thanks to rolling and twisting on the bed for a while, her feelings gradually calmed down.

Kirika suddenly got up and took a deep breath.

Forget about Valentine's chocolate.

That was originally a ritual for settling the hesitation in her heart. It was merely a kind of personal declaration of war. Besides—Even if she failed to elicit an obvious reaction, no matter how small, she still believed she had caused some ripples in his heart.

This was the first step in her offensive. All she had to do was act with greater initiative from now on.

"By the way... I never expected all of us to be in the same class. In other words, the playing field is level..."

Kirika recalled her classmates in Year 2 Class 1. Those girls who were both friends and rivals. Oh right, during homeroom, the quick vote had decided her as the class representative.

"It's Kana and others' fault for nominating me without thought... Seriously. But if no one else wanted to do it, I guess I have to. Anyway, being the

class rep allows me to help him, and refusing would leave a bad impression... Hmm...?"

Staring up at the ceiling and murmuring to herself, she suddenly found a question surfacing in her mind.

—Supposing, hypothetically, if I'm no longer the class rep...

How will he address me?

"! ...Ooh, ah..."

She was shocked by her imagination.

Back when Year 1 class 1 started, he was probably intending to call her "Class Rep Ueno," right? But because he got tongue-tied, it became "Class Rep." Taizou even teased him about it but he smiled and defended himself, saying it was too difficult to say. Ever since, he had called her class rep, but—

This had a possibility of changing, right?

If she were not the class rep, perhaps he would change his manner of address. Then what would he call her? Ueno-san? That would be too formal. Fear and the girls were like family to him and therefore exceptions, but take Kana for example, he also called her Kana directly. Judging along these lines, then she would be—

"K-Kirika... or something like that?"

...

.....

"Ooh, uwahhhhhh! Ahhhhhh!"

The temperature of her cheeks instantly rose to boiling point. Suddenly, heat gushed out from the depths of her body, incinerating her brain to mush. She collapsed on the bed again, turning her face and burying it into the pillow while attacking the blanket with karate chops nonstop.

S-So there existed a future where he would call her name directly? Had she failed? No, things were not set yet, but since she had already accepted the position of class rep again, after all, there was no way to refuse by this point. That said, supposing... Only hypothetically—

"...Kirika... Ooh, fufu, ufufufu!"

Oh no. No good. This was no good.

Simply imagining it was already making her this weird.

If he really called her that, she had no completely idea how she would react.

So... Definitely... This was fine—At least for now.

However, she wished for one day...

Eventually—

Kirika kept her face buried in the pillow for a very long time.

Hence, only the pillow could witness the expression on her face while she indulged in her blissful ecstasy.

Part 2

The next day, normal classes resumed. Of course, lessons themselves could not possibly get interesting all of a sudden just because they were promoted to Year 2, but due to changes in the class list and the teachers delivering the subjects, it did feel new and refreshing.

Then the lunch break came. Haruaki could see Shiraho resting her face on one hand, elbow against the desk, eating bread. Her gaze was directed out the window but her head occasionally nodded as though concurring. The girl sitting opposite her was Sorashiro Hinata whom Haruaki met once at the cultural festival last year. She was energetically making conversation with Shiraho. Haruaki had imagined Shiraho to go rushing to the superintendent's office every day with her bread, but apparently due to Sovereignty insisting "at least have some more contact with your classmates at lunch!", this situation had started during Year 1.

Feeling someone looking at him, Haruaki looked back and met gazes with a girl who was sitting nearby.

"Say... Why don't you come over here as well? You've been staring at us all the time, it's quite annoying."

"What are you talking about? I inquire with this kind of inquiry. Please don't mind me, munch munch... I am fine like this, my completely genuine suggestion... Munch munch munch..."

Un Izoey was eating a meat bun with great enjoyment while holding a pencil like a child and writing in the notebook hanging on her neck. Then she nodded with satisfaction and happily took out the next meat bun from the drawer in her desk. Haruaki gave up on saying more to her and turned back to the massive gathering of desks in front of him.

"Ehehe~ I'm so happy that we can all eat lunch together from now on."

"M-M-Me too, I'm so happy! This must be God listening to my pleas! Yahoo~! Who knows when food exchange events might happen, oh mommy, I want the curry lunchbox sealed away forever—!"

Konoha had joined the usual lunch group. Apparently a Konoha fan, Taizou became greatly emotional and almost made the scene a little weird, but he was probably going to get used to it... Haruaki hoped so.

"Hey Taizou, you're especially noisy today—Hmm?"

Fear suddenly turned her head. Haruaki followed her gaze to see several unfamiliar students at the classroom's doorway. They were frequently glancing towards them, laughing to one another, then left soon after. Although Haruaki was completely baffled, at least there was no malice in their laughter.

"Hmm... This also happened many times during break. What's going on?"

"They look like they're probably first-year students. It feels like they came running to have a look out of curiosity after hearing about the foreigner girl and upperclassman in Year 2."

"It's not like I'm an object for display. Whatever, I'll treat this as the beginning rumors of the 'super beauty.' In that case, it can't be helped. Hohoho."

Amidst a brand new lunch landscape, there were scenes identical to back in Year 1, namely—

"Gah! Why is the flavor so concentrated? What kind of secret recipe did you use...!?"

"Nyahaha~ Even after promoting to Year 2, the positions of the reigning champ and the challenger still hasn't changed~ However, I, Kana, can assert that your cooking is very yummy too, Kirika-chan."

"Absolutely ridiculous. If that comment could satisfy me, I would have given up a long time ago...!"

Even with new members in the lunch group, the lunch duel still took place as usual, along with the usual result at the same time. That said, Haruaki felt a bit apologetic towards Kirika.

"I even lost the first battle in Year 2... What an unfavorable start. But no, I won't give up. I will surely avenge my loss."

"P-Please be merciful. But anyway... I really think the difference is only just a little bit."

"The question is what exactly is that little bit."

"Oh dear~ I guess we might be influenced by preconceptions. After all, with the contest persisting over an entire year, perhaps our brains have already been indoctrinated by the idea that 'Akki's cooking seems to taste better,' so our taste buds make the correction on their own."

"Then in other words, as judges, your tongues have already subconsciously filtered the results. In that case... Right, perhaps it's time for a change of environment. We keep having the duel in the classroom, so maybe a shift in battlefield is all that's needed to precipitate other changes."

"A shift in battlefield... Like eating lunch on the roof?"

At this moment, Kirika widened her eyes as though recalling something. Then blinking repeatedly, her gaze wandered and after glancing frequently at Haruaki, she spoke:

"No... Umm... Yachi, given the rare opportunity... How about a flower viewing? I just happened to think of it, after all, the season is just right, perhaps we could use it as a chance to hold a lunch duel with a different atmosphere than the classroom."

"Really? It's already the flower viewing season this year? It seems to get earlier every year."

Haruaki was a little surprised. How rare for Kirika to be inviting a gathering on her own initiative.

Kirika waited for his answer with slightly blushing cheeks, exuding an air that felt different from the past.

"A flower viewing? I've heard of that, it's having alcoholic beverages and eating stuff while admiring cherry blossoms, right!? Hmm... Eating rice crackers under the cherry blossom trees, that feels like it'll be especially tasty. Yes, let's go! When are we going flower viewing? Today or tomorrow? Leave it to me, I'll text Kuroe right now!"

"Haha, that's way too rushed... But if we don't hurry up, the cherry blossoms will all wilt. How about we decide on this coming Sunday?"

"Nyah~ Going flower viewing together, that sounds like great fun... But unfortunately, I can't go. I've got something on Sunday."

"Oooooh, me too. There are club activities on Sunday. Normally, I could go after noon... But just this week, there's other stuff to do after the usual club activities! God is so cruel!"

"I knew it, the baseball club too~? Same here same here, we've got to prepare for the welcoming festival~"

Kana and Taizou nodded at each other with great disappointment.

"Welcoming festival? I'm hearing about that kind of event for the first time."

"Right, Fear-chan only transferred here in the second term."

"The welcoming festival is short for the new student welcoming festival~ If the cultural festival is the autumn festival, then this would be the spring festival! The upperclassmen will welcome and treat the new first-year students and tell them how great this school is! That's one of the event's main goals. For students who have already joined clubs, this is also an important opportunity to recruit new members!"

Of course, Haruaki had experienced this even last year. Simply stated, it was like a great recruiting party held by the clubs together as a union. The drama club had activities in the gym, the dance club offered performances outside, the cooking club had a stall set up to sell crepes, and for some reason, the cheerleading club only competed by putting out a fried noodle stall exclusively manned by male staff. Ultimately, the main goal was to

exhibit themselves as much as possible, to let new students know of their clubs' existence, thereby attracting their interest.

Fear had her head tilted as though unable to comprehend, so Haruaki explained further.

"Unlike the cultural festival which is based on homeroom classes as individual units, the stalls in the welcoming festival are pretty much based on clubs. I've heard that if you like, you can even make your own group to participate as long as you apply. Also, I don't know why, but the finale is a School MissCon involving the entire student body. This seems to be a kind of tradition."

"This is also the first I've heard of the term school MissCon."

"Uh, it's basically short for School Beauty Contest to Name Miss Taishyuu High... Yeah, it's like a beauty pageant."

"So they're holding that kind of event too, but it's got nothing to do with clubs recruiting members."

"Not necessarily. Although it's only limited to girls, if contestants wear their club uniforms, it serves as final publicity to recruit members. However, anyone can participate in the School MissCon, whether self-nominated or nominated by others, no matter if you're in a club or not."

According to Haruaki's own irresponsible speculation, the person who first organized this event simply did a half-assed job—"A final event to wrap things up... Can't think of one! But since there's a festival already, anything will do as long as it makes the mood lively. Then let's hold a school beauty pageant!" But for sure, that person never dreamt it would become a tradition.

"So that's why on Sunday, the clubs need to prepare for the welcoming festival~ But if you miss the chance, the cherry blossoms might end up all wilting. Besides, the clubs will definitely be organizing flower viewings together... So don't mind us two, you guys just go ahead!"

"Damn it, I really mind, but I dunno how my seniors in the club would punish me if I skipped out on activities. Although I'm promoted to Year 2, it's still a middle management position after all. The days of flagrantly abusing my position are still far away...!"

Thus, Kana and Taizou were regretfully unable to attend. Haruaki felt bad for them, but due to club activities, they could not be forced.

"So sorry, I only invited you guys on a sudden whim."

"No no no, Kirika-chan, I said it already, don't mind us~ Oh right, have you decided where you're going for the flower viewing? Territorial battles on Sunday for prime flower viewing will definitely be intense."

"Hmm, now that you mention it, there is indeed the issue of location. Since it's not often we go flower viewing, I'd really like to visit somewhere pretty. But the better the location, the more people there'd be... What should I do?"

Kirika tilted her head with a solemn expression. Haruaki also searched his memories but could not come up with a good location. If only the trees planted in the Yachi residence's garden or backyard were cherry blossom trees, then there would be no problem at all.

Konoha also tilted her head, apparently pondering the same problem. Same with Fear—But since she was not that familiar with the town, she was probably just doing it for appearance's sake. As though saying "I can't lose to Cow Tits," she hastily crossed her arms and closed her eyes in deep thought. While she was whimpering "mumumu" and shaking her head from side to side—

In that very instant, something unexpected happened.

"Kyoe!! Truly so explosively peerlessly cute that I can't help but cry out crudely! Although it's very sudden, I can't bear it anymore! Love you!"

"Dwahhhhhhhh!"

Sitting on her chair, Fear was suddenly hugged from behind by someone. Grinning from ear to ear, rubbing her face against Fear's silver hair nonstop—A girl they had never met before.

Despite the girl bowing down to hug Fear tightly, it was obvious from one glance that she was very tall. Her face was filled with an innocent and radiant smile, carrying no malice at all. Her hair was shoulder length overall but the lock of hair hanging from her temples was longer on one side.

"What's going on, what on earth happened? What are you doing!?"

"Huohhhhhh! I'm so grateful, anyway, I am truly grateful—!"

"W-Wait a sec——! You're charging ahead way too quickly!"

The group heard another voice and turned to look. This time, a familiar first-year student rushed into the classroom. Namely, Chihaya. She originally rushed over in great strides but stopped halfway.

"Oh! Shiraho...-san. H-Hello...!"

"A rare visitor indeed. What's the matter? This is a second-year classroom, you know?"

"Huff... U-Umm... Right. Because I still haven't thanked you properly for your help back in January, I wanted to come over and say—"

"To be honest, it's no longer necessary by this juncture. Besides, I didn't do much either. You have no reason to thank me."

"Uh... Yes. Sorry for disturbing you, I'm so sorry..."

"You're not disturbing me. After all, I'm currently very free."

"Is this someone you know? What's your relationship?" Hinata inquisitively asked Shiraho, but Shiraho could not be bothered to explain, so she continued to lean her face on her hand against the desk, simply murmuring: "Just an underclassman I've met before."

"Putting that aside... What is going on there?"

Shiraho turned her gaze with exasperation. Naturally, it was directed towards—

"Hey, let go of me now! How much longer are you going to touch me as you please!?"

"So soft~ So small~ Such smooth skin~! It's just as expected yet beyond expectation!"

"...I'm sorry. She's my classmate, anyway... She's been pestering me to introduce her to that girl. I was thinking it'd be okay to let her tag along while I came here to thank you, Shiraho-san, but it ended up—"

"Like this huh... How numerous in this world, the ranks of the mentally ill."

Shiraho sighed as well. This time, Chihaya finally seemed to remember her own responsibilities.

"Hey, it's about time you restrain yourself! Let go of her now!"

"Abya!? A completely merciless chop to the back of the head, seamlessly flowing into a pinch of the face—Hayahaya, you're very used to this, right? Very used to this type of violent taming? What a scary kid...!"

Chihaya resorted to violence to pull the mysterious girl away from Fear. Although the girl was doing nothing more than rubbing her cheek, Fear still acted like a wary cat, hiding behind the back of her chair to serve as a shield.

"Ooh, what's with this girl? What's your goal...?"



"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm too slow in introducing myself! I am Hiwatari Yume!
Pleased to meet you!"

The girl saluted in one clean motion, with an extremely radiant smile on her face while saying a strange greeting.

"Let me state for the record, don't ask me any questions since I don't know how I'm supposed to answer. That's because I only met this girl yesterday. By the way, I didn't even want to know her in the first place."

"Hayahaya, you're so cold~ Oh, Hayahaya is short for Hayakawa Chihaya! I made this nickname up, but please go ahead and use it if you want, everyone!"

"Stop promoting it! By the way, I find it embarrassing enough already simply with one person using it, so stop it! Ugh, you're super annoying as expected... You're also unnecessarily big."

"But this nickname is clearly so cute~ And Hayahaya, I can't believe you called me annoying, I'm so shocked! In this kind of moment, I wish you'd add a word or two to turn it into one of the latest concepts, 'annoyingly cute'!"

"Gah! I can't believe you can say completely unabashed, that's even more annoying...!"

"But speaking of cute, the person who best embodies that concept is right here before my eyes. Muhu!"

The girl—Yume—began to hyperventilate slightly. Fear backed away again in terror.

"I-I get it. This girl turns out to be a deviant! Put bluntly, she's just a deviant!"

"I think that term suits her quite well for the most part. More accurately, she's an annoying deviant."

"Of course not~! I've simply fallen in love at first sight with Fear-san here... Oh of course, I don't mean sexually! It simply means I want to give you a good loving!"

...Wha? Fear's mouth gaped in shock. Yume coughed lightly once.

"After seeing you yesterday, Fear-san, I was struck by an explosively powerful impact. I never thought someone in this world could be so cute, so I've been publicizing all around. Among the first-year new students, there's no one who hasn't heard of you, Fear-san... Probably, but I guess there could be a few I missed."

Haruaki recalled what happened just now. The groups of underclassmen who peeked into the classroom from the corridor. So that was because they were thinking: "Let's check out the Fear-san whose cuteness everyone has been talking about and see what she actually looks like." The mystery was apparently solved.

"But I don't think that's enough! I want everyone to see more of Fear-san's cute side, so in order to let everyone admire, savor and share—I've decided!"

Yume clenched her fist forcefully while her eyes glimmered brightly without a shred of impurity.

Then she made a vigorous declaration:

"—I want to establish a fan club for Fear-san! So that's why I came to make a request of you today! I want to organize lots and lots of activities, like a club magazine, a hobby group revolving around Fear-san and a photo shoot contest where people bring the outfits they like. Also there's—"

"S-Stop it right there! Stop! Shut up! Don't wanna! I refuse! I refuse resolutely! Although I'm still quite lost, I don't like being treated by others as some kind of exotic animal, go find someone else!"

Fear roared while waving her arms forcefully in a threatening manner, causing Yume to tilt her head and smile:

"Awww, you don't need to be so modest~ ...What an easily shy person you are!"

"Of course not~! You girl, listen properly to others!"

How to handle this girl? —Just as Fear was glaring unhappily at Yume, the reminder bell rang in the classroom to signal the imminent end of the lunch break. Chihaya approached Yume as though going "Perfect timing!"

"I. Said. Already. —I'd take you to the classroom, but things won't necessarily go your way. She already said no, so don't force the issue. Okay, let's go back!"

"That's so unreasonable~ Ah, ouch ouch!"

Chihaya chopped the back of Yume's head repeatedly with her hand then grabbed the back of her collar.

"Basically, I've already shown you the way, so remember to stick to that promise... Uh, that's it."

"It must be tough for you. Hurry and get back to your classroom—if you find the load too much of a hassle, just chuck it by the side of the road along the way."

"I'd really like to do that too. So... We'll be heading off now."

Chihaya bowed her head politely towards Shiraho then dragged Yume out the classroom directly.

"What does she mean by load? Say, getting dragged like this by you, Hayahaya, is a bit embarrassing, but it relieves me from walking, how relaxing~ Thank you for your efforts until we reach the classroom—Guha! You threw me aside so quickly after it was mentioned! Like casting off a load!"

For quite some time, noisy chattering came incessantly from the corridor, but silence soon returned. Finally back to peace and quiet, the members of Haruaki's group looked at one another.

"Umumumu, I actually agree with what she said. If a fan club really gets established, I, Kana, will join, no problem at all, but this sort of thing needs the consent of the idol in question after all~"

"Certain people do exist in this world with quite extreme tastes. Oh well, in any case, let her do as she wishes, I'd say."

"Nuu, you're all talking like it doesn't matter just because it's not about you...! Damn Cow Tits, you'd better get caught by that kind of illogical girl as well and get rubbed and mashed randomly. Although I love hugging soft an furry things, I don't like being touched randomly by others!"

"Finally you get a chance to understand how those poor little cats and dogs feel, isn't that nice?"

"How troubling, what an absolutely ridiculous commotion. However—"

"Oh, Class Rep, you realized too? In that regard, perhaps it can be considered perfect timing."

Haruaki and Kirika nodded at each other. Fear pouted unhappily and said:

"What do you mean, perfect timing!? Getting hassled by an illogical girl is total misfortune no matter how I look at it!"

"Basically the matter we were talking about before those two arrived. Okay, let's ask her after school."

Due to the massive shock caused by the new student called Yume, the matter had probably vanished without a trace from Fear's mind. "...?" She simply cocked her petite head in puzzlement.

Hence, after school—

"In other words, I wanna ask if there's a private flower viewing spot at your family's shrine that doesn't need any competing with crowds for territory! If there is, I want you to tell us!"

"Kyah! Wait... Stop scaring me!"

Appearing at the school entrance, Chihaya was so frightened that she kept retreating. This was because Fear suddenly yelled out to her while hidden completely behind the shoe locker. When Chihaya first appeared, Fear maintained her posture as though sneaking behind enemy lines, remaining hidden behind the shoe locker, cautiously looking this way and that.

"Oh... Are you watching out for that girl?"

"Looks like it. But I don't think you need to be that afraid."

"I agree. What does it matter? It's just a little hugging and touching."

"I-I'm not afraid, okay! I'll curse you! That's right, of course I'm not afraid—How should I put this? It's because it's too incomprehensible so I'm at a total loss, not knowing how to react, so it makes me uncomfortable all over—Anyway, I'm not good at handling her. If possible, I don't wanna run into her."

"She went home for the day already. So, what were you guys talking about? A flower viewing spot...?"

After hearing that Yume was gone, Fear exhaled in relief. Haruaki glanced at her from the side while explaining to Chihaya. In other words, they intended to have a flower viewing this coming Sunday and were searching for a location.

"Of course, to express our gratitude, since the location is near your home, we also plan on inviting you, Isuzu and the whole lot to join us. As for lunch, allow us to make the most of our skills to produce superb delicacies—"

"—Let me ask a question first. Who will be coming for the flower viewing?"

This could very well be an excellent chance. Everyone knew about Chihaya's weakness. Konoha gave Haruaki a look that seemed to be saying "Hurry and bring up the sure-win words!" Haruaki replied with an acknowledging gaze.

"Oh... Yes, basically everyone who was there for New Year's. Of course we will also invite Shiraho—"

"Inviting me is your freedom, but please do not decide my answer without consent, human. I have no interest in joining a pest party organized by a pest. When a pest is filled to the very bones with perverted lust of pitch black, the sight of cherry blossoms will surely provoke his desires to rape, violate and corrupt that which is pure and untainted, then undoubtedly proceeding to act upon them. Dear underclassman over there, please call the police now while you still can."

Shiraho happened to pass by and left without looking back, leaving behind words of stinging barbs as usual. She was probably off to pick up Sovereignty. What unfavorable timing.

However, that did not change the overall situation. Since they were planning on inviting Sovereignty, once she accepted, Shiraho would still end up coming along despite what she said. Just as Haruaki was about to speak—

"...No problem. I'll explain to you. But let me confirm first, it's the coming Sunday, right? If it's any other day, I'm sorry I'll have to refuse."

Chihaya was very upfront. The group found it a little unexpected.

"Yes, we plan to go this coming Sunday, but... Chihaya-kun, is it really okay?"

Seeing Chihaya agree so readily, even Kirika was quite surprised, blinking while asking.

"No problem. But I have condition. On that day, you guys need to come early in the morning, because there are many preparations."

"Preparations?"

"J-Just take my word, preparations are preparations. Got that? I'll tell you guys the precise location once you arrive. So, I'll be going now."

Chihaya ended the conversation, speaking inexplicably fast, swiftly changed her shoes and walked out the gates.

"She wants us to get there early to prepare—meaning stuff like sweeping and cleaning up? Maybe the place is full of weeds right now and there's no place to sit."

"If it's a private viewing spot, that's very probably. In any case, the important thing is that the location has been set. After that, what remains is... Honing my cooking skills for that day...!"

"Nuu, I can feel some intense vigor there, Kirika. Do your best, I will support you! By the way, if you're willing to prepare special handmade rice crackers, I'll unconditionally give you my vote!"

"Hold on, speaking of which, the usual judges Taizou and Kana won't be there. Earlier, we were talking about how Fear and the others might not be fair judges due to being used to eating Yachi's cooking, which is why those two were asked... This is a dilemma now."

"...About that, I was thinking it'll be fine if we asked other people who don't usually eat my cooking. That's why I've been holding back until now, but finally I have to speak out—What are you doing?"

Haruaki turned to ask the person with striking characteristics who had actually been staying in the corner of his eye even before they came to the shoe lockers—in other words, the dark-skinned girl who was standing motionlessly while facing the notice board. When Haruaki spoke to her, the girl pretended to finally notice them and turned around.

"Oh my, what a coincidence. I greet with this kind of greeting."

"Are you playing dumb? Anyway, I'm quite impressed with your bold lack of shame. Clearly you've perking your ears to eavesdrop."

"My answer: asking what are you talking about. Uh... This poster says: 'Come! Youngsters! Recruiting talent to establish the oil wrestling club! Let us get all oiled up together!' Because the content is very unknown, I am just very curious, I stand by this kind of stance. Especially the last sentence is too unknown, it makes me want to experience for myself—Let us get all oiled up together! Like that."

"What the heck kind of club is that? I don't really get it but hearing it from you, I just find it very shameless."

"You're already caught red-handed, so there's no need to try so hard in covering up... By the way, since you already heard the conversation just now, you must be planning on secretly observing us on Sunday for research, right? While viewing the flowers, it'd be totally uncomfortable if someone kept staring at us intently while hiding behind the cherry blossom trees. Since the more the merrier, and this is a rare chance, why don't you join us?"

Haruaki's impromptu question caused Un Izoey to blink her eyes that showed no signs of emotional fluctuation.

"My question... Permission given? Confirming."

"Yeah, because if we leave you alone, you might end up climbing the sacred cherry blossom trees and breaking branches. In that case, having you somewhere within our sight is less worrying."

"Class Rep, are you okay with that?"

Kirika frowned and stared at Un Izoey for a long while, finally exhaling deeply.

"...Can't be helped. I coincidentally have something to talk to this girl about. It happens to be a good opportunity."

"Then it's decided. Country girl, be very grateful to us!"

In this manner—within less than a day after Kirika suggested a flower viewing, they quickly settled the location and participants for the most part.

Part 3

In one car of the bullet train, one quarter of the passengers were currently foreigners. Sharing few similarities in physical characteristics, they were

also dressed quite differently. If a point of commonality had to be stated, they each kept a staff ID from the same company in their pocket. The group consisted of staff from a sales management company of antique art, headquartered abroad, currently in Japan on a company retreat—At least on the surface.

Lilyhowell Kilmister was dressed in a formal women's business suit for a number of reasons. First of all, dressing in a suit made it easier to fit in with the surrounding environment in this country, according to her judgment. Also, there was personal laziness for she could not be bothered to come up with another set of plain clothing. As for the second reason, as the leader of this team, she believed she had to dress more formally than the others in order to maintain her sense of authority.

Maintaining authority through formal attire, perhaps this notion itself was completely pointless—She turned her gaze lightly. The man sitting next to her soon noticed with his observant eyes and cheerfully made small talk with her—To be honest, it was already a miracle that he was able to shut up temporarily for the past few minutes.

"Heehaw! I know, I know, I know—! You're look at this, right? You wanna ask me what kinda fucking music I'm listening on these headphones, right? This bro sees through everything! Heehaw~ Haha~"

If anything, the question surfacing in her mind was: How does he actually wash those dreadlocks of his? Don't they itch? But sort of misunderstanding did not matter to her at all. Feeling there was no necessity in clear up this misconception and for the sake of establishing an amicable working relationship, she said:

"Yes Neto, what music are you listening to?"

"Oh, that's fucking great. I'll make myself clear. Other people often judge me casually just because of the way I look. Prejudice is bad, really bad. Truly fucking assholes. Those who think I only listen to hip hop just because I'm a black guy with dreadlocks, where have their brains gone missing? Honestly, I don't even know what reggae means. Capoeira? I don't dance that, sheesh."

"What a compelling argument. Judging someone's interests and tastes purely by their appearance is a very serious problem. So, what song are you listening to?"

Neto grinned to reveal a set of sparkling white teeth, smiling radiantly. Taking off his headphones, he pressed it lightly against her ear. From there, she heard—

"—Is it this country's traditional music? The distinctive manner of vocalization and pronunciation is truly interesting."

"This is Japanese enka singing! I love oriental stuff. Sushi, karate, ninjas... But no, someone always asks a fucking question at this time. Basically, why don't I put my hair in a samurai topknot? Those guys are just super asshole morons! No matter how much I love oriental stuff, once I put on a kimono, the image is a total fail. Learn how to read the mood, fuckers!"

"Truly an excellent mindset you have there."

Lilyhowell used a fingertip to gently lift the spectacles she only wore when reading. Pulling her gaze back, she settled on a small but thick booklet that had been kept on her lap all along, thereby conveying the message that the conversation was over. The dialogue just now was carried out in English, neither was it terribly important, but it would be prudent to avoid any leak in information. Minimizing pointless talking would be best. However—

"Heehaw. Hey hey, I've wanted to ask you for a while, is that book a good read?"

"Not bad."

"No, but... That's just a cellphone manual, right?"

"Precisely. Be that as it may, this manual is able to satisfy my desire for knowledge. I find it quite excellent that all the information is recorded in there in such detail. Surprisingly, the type of book that limits information to only the essentials does not exist. Added to this is the fact that this country's cellphones are very high-performance and equipped with many functions, which makes the manual quite an interesting read."

Neto shrugged silently. Lilyhowell then recalled the person who had prepared this cellphone, saying it was for "facilitating communications," currently not on the bullet train but supposed to be working at the scene already.

"Right, has there been any communications from her? As I recall, her name is... Laurica Shoegazer?"

"Just call her trash. Laurica 'Trash' Shoegazer! My most beloved 'Trash'! She still hasn't contacted me, possibly malfunctioning like trash. Heehaw!"

"That girl is the key to the current operation. I do not believe it is quite appropriate to excessively abuse her with malicious insults."

"Calling her the key is such an exaggeration that it'll make her vain and carried away. After all, what she's doing is no different from a collection of petty tricks. She's just a girl who can become nothing more than useless trash after all. Know that she's a masochist, so laying on the verbal abuse will actually make her happier. Heehaw!"

It was Lilyhowell's turn to shrug this time.

This was because despite calling someone else a masochist, Neto's peculiar fetish was even worse. A fact that was already public knowledge.

Part 4

On the morning of the Sunday dedicated to flower viewing, Haruaki's friends showed up at the grounds of the Hayakawa shrine. Fortunately, the sky was cloudless as far as the eye could see, exhibiting perfect weather for having a flower viewing. The shrine's grounds were lined with cherry blossom trees and the grass was already covered entirely with tarps. Some people had already started banquets. Had Chihaya not been willing to tell them about a private flower viewing spot, surely they would have needed to fight a tough battle to secure a location.

Walking at the site, apart from the quartet of Haruaki, Fear, Konoha and Kirika who planned this flower viewing, there was Kuroe who had signed up as expected, saying "Everyone is going flower viewing together!? This is clearly no time for working, of course I must go with the flow!", as well as Sovereignty who had accepted the invitation instantly as soon as she received Fear's text message. Also as expected, it was impossible for Shiraho to refuse Sovereignty's invitation. Finally, there was Un Izoey, wearing her navel-baring lab coat as always.

"But... It's really bustling even when it's still early in the morning."

"Also, the vendor stalls really make this feel like a festival. Are Sundays always like this here...?"

The group chatted while making their way around the main shrine building. Instead of the shrine's confines, they were heading towards a

Japanese-style residence deep in the grounds, in other words, the building where Chihaya and her family normally lived.

Reaching the entrance whose antique airs rivaled that of the Yachi home, they pressed the door bell.

"Coming~ Oh my oh my, welcome, everyone~"

A shrine maiden came out to welcome them, apparently Isuzu, back in her basic role. Accompanied by heavy footsteps, Chihaya emerged from the house. Seeing her appearance, Haruaki was a little shocked. For some unknown reason, Chihaya was dressed in her work clothes, or in other words, the shrine maiden outfit with the two massive slits on the side of the thighs.

"Since you guys are here, let's start immediately... Misuzu, Toohisuzu, just grab a few random sets."

After Chihaya issued orders towards the depths of the hallway, two pleasantly smiling shrine maidens approached, carrying what looked like piles of fabric then putting them down at the entrance. Chihaya threw a glance then said:

"So, I guess I'll explain a bit. I am asking you to work for the next bit. Today, the shrine is holding a 'Flower Festival'—anyway, something like a spring festival."

"...Eh?"

Smiling and lightly tilting her head, Isuzu said:

"Due to a lack of manpower, Chihaya-sama's father had asked Chihaya-sama, hoping she could invite as many interested students from school as possible~ Although she was able to find one person, the more the better. As though on cue, you then made your request. We couldn't actually welcome it more~"

"I could have ignored you guys' request, you know, but since it makes us even and having people working for us for free would save some costs, allowing this run-down old shrine to earn a bit of money, indirectly assuring my own pocket money, hence that is why very reluctantly, helping you guys was not completely out of the question—Hold it right there——!"

"Gwah! What's wrong?"

Chihaya grabbed Haruaki's collar without warning. From point-blank range, she looked up at Haruaki with eyes filled with rage and panic, then whispered in his ear:

"D-Didn't she say she wasn't coming...!? Why is she here!?"

"You only noticed now!? Uh, even if she said she wasn't, it ends up depending on Sovereignty's wishes. It doesn't really matter to us, but isn't it better for you if she came? Don't you want to talk to her more?"

"Yeah... True... But not right now! I was only able to con you guys to do free work without any guilt because she wasn't coming! What am I to do? Now this is making me end up deceiving her!"

"To put it bluntly, you're simply reaping what you sow!"

In any case, Konoha was the first to murmur: "After all, we were the ones who asked her for a favor first, so this can't be helped." As for the matter of helping out itself, Fear and the others did not seem to have any objections.

"Ohoh~ Shrine maiden outfits! There are sizes that fit me?"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, of course! Because we've held events where children dressed up as shrine maidens~"

"So cute! Can I wear one! Wow, actually I've always wanted to try wearing one!"

What Misuzu and Toohisuzu had brought to the entrance were several shrine maiden outfits. In contrast to Sovereignty who was picking up one of them in great interest, Shiraho showed eyes of exhaustion.

"After being dragged out to this kind of place early in the morning, now I have to work while wearing this sort of getup?"

"Ah... Uh, umm... Shiraho-san, if it's you, uh..."

Just as Chihaya stuttered, trying to offer Shiraho a personal exemption—

"What does it matter!? I so wanna see Shiraho dressed up as a shrine maiden! It'll be so cute! It's not every day that we get to dress up as shrine maidens together, of course you need to try it! Hey Shiraho... Please?"

Hugging a shrine maiden outfit, Sovereignty tilted her dainty face and looked up at Shiraho. It was as though a "kyuun" sound effect could be heard. Shiraho staggered then turned her gaze away.

"I-If you say so... It can't be helped. I am simply going to wear it. Don't expect me to help."

"Yes! Shiraho, thank you! Conversely, I will work hard to help! A professional maid's skills should be possible to apply towards a shrine maiden's job since both are service-oriented! Probably!"

"Ah... Umm... Sorry, uh... I am really sorry."

In response to Chihaya who was apologizing in trepidation, her head bowed low, Shiraho slumped her shoulders and said helplessly:

"Okay, it's fine. After all, this is wholly the fault of the human who planned this occasion and brought us here. I really wish for him to die an unsightly death, leaving a tale of mockery for future generations to circulate widely. For example, choking and suffocating to death from trying to eat a red hakama because of an obsessive fetish for shrine maidens."

Hence, things were decided. At Chihaya's behest, the group started helping with the spring festival. However, there was one fact they had failed to catch, rather unfortunate for Fear, mainly. Essentially, they failed to notice what Isuzu said about inviting "as many interested students from school as possible" and Chihaya being "able to find one person."

In any case, in order to change into the work clothes, Fear's group was just about to enter the Hayakawa home when—

The entrance opened suddenly and another shrine maiden appeared.

"I have returned~! I just met your dad at the shrine's main building, Hayahaya, and he asked me to pass you a message that it's almost time to head over—Awawawawoohoo! Woohoo! My emotions are surging madly and rapidly from this unbelievable encounter, finally turning into a weird dance while I'm approaching!"

"Eek, she appeared—!"

Hugging a shrine maiden outfit, Fear escaped towards the corridor with great alarm. Bearing a wide grin (also twisting her arms in a weird manner), the person chasing after Fear was—

Of course, it was precisely the one with the tall figure and charming face, the (self-styled) annoyingly cute underclassman.

The spring festival's main tent was set up in the shrine's confines and in the very center of the main cherry blossoms path where the flower viewing crowd was gathered. Haruaki's group was working industriously in the tent's surroundings on their various assigned jobs.

"...So it goes like this. Because Hayahaya took me to Fear-san's classroom, that counts as a favor which I need to return~ We also invited another friend of ours, a girl called Himenon, but she couldn't come because she's busy and I was thinking I'd be so lonely. I didn't even know that Fear-san was coming, so this is really an explosively peerless happy surprise, fefefe!"

"You're really laughing like an evil weirdo. Anyway, Chihaya first asked you to work... Hmm, so that means it didn't matter to Chihaya whether or not you ran into Fear."

Haruaki and Yume were holding bamboo brooms to sweep the ground near the tent. Of course, Yume was dressed in a borrowed shrine maiden outfit. Making unnecessary movements seemed to be a habit of hers. Haruaki watched as she alternated between swinging her broom strenuously and wiping her drool. At least, she was certainly a lively and cheerful child. As for being annoying or annoyingly cute, Haruaki decided not to comment.

As a side note, Haruaki was currently wearing a Shinto priest's white outfit that was lent to him. He did not know if the look suited him, but in any case, Fear reacted with loud laughter, Kuroe took out her camera without saying a word, Kirika clumsily averted her gaze, whereas Konoha made a terrifying, ecstatic smile while staring intently at him, saying: "A different Haruaki-kun from usual... Awesome...!" After seeing everyone's reactions, Haruaki still had no idea whether it looked good on him or not.

"Hello and welcome. You would like two of this merchandise? Understood."

Konoha was at the vending tent, serving as a cashier. Of course, she was dressed in shrine maiden outfit as well. The image of purity, with the colors white and red, suited Konoha's quiet demeanor superbly. However, due to the white top's plain design, it also plainly emphasized the curves of her figure. Ahhh, seriously, compared to western attire, that vivid and solid sense of weight, wobbling and quivering—

No good no good, Haruaki turned his awareness away from Konoha's bosom. Sitting in the tent, recording sales was Kirika. Since there was no

cash register, she was apparently confirming sold merchandise one by one.

Kirika was also dressed as a shrine maiden, a perfect match for her straitlaced, noble-minded and clean image. She lifted her hair lightly, presumably finding it in the way when looking down at the account book. Then appearing to be performing calculations in her mind, she went "hmm~" while pressing her pencil above her lip and tilting her head. This action caused her black hair to slide down her neck—A sight that caused Haruaki's heart to race inexplicably. Despite the only difference being a departure from her usual attire, Haruaki found her image quite refreshing for some reason.

Sitting next to Kirika was Shiraho. Elbow on the able, face resting on her hand in boredom, she looked beautiful as a goddess, like a shrine maiden possessed by divinity. Her gaze was forever focused on the airheaded shrine maiden, running about the place, carrying trays of amazake, a sweet low-alcohol drink made from fermented rice. Although there were many a precarious situation, Kuroe would always extend a helping hand in time, dressed in a child-sized shrine maiden outfit. Kuroe was currently handing out amazake together with Sovereignty. Due to her looking like a kid helping out, all the visitors were smiling sweetly while receiving the amazake from her hand. "How amazing." Some of the elderly even went as far as to stroke her head. It was quite a refreshing sight.

The amazake supply came from a large, cylindrical iron pot. A foreign shrine maiden with gray hair and dark skin was currently stirring the amazake in the pot with a ladle. Whether due to tribal rules or insistence, she still bared her navel even when wearing a shrine maiden outfit. Un Izoey had forcibly pulled out the hem of the white kimono jacket and tied a knot on the side of her waist. Consequently, this produced the same situation as Chihaya, problematically, the side slits of the hakama offered direct glimpses to the bare skin of her thighs, due to the white garment being withdrawn from the hakama. As a side note, due to her adamant refusal to wear Japanese socks, she was only wearing geta clogs directly on her bare feet after they convinced to compromise after great difficulty.

(Appearance aside... At least she seems to be working seriously. That's the most important thing.)

Just at this moment, Haruaki suddenly noticed a shrine maiden kneeling down behind the tent.

"Mumu! Hohou... I see... Understood~"

That particular shrine maiden was holding her hands against the back of her ears, apparently communicating telepathically with her comrades. It was probably an inexplicable sight for bystanders and one could almost hear sound effects like that of radio waves and static. Soon after, presumably having ended the conversation, the shrine maiden, one of the kagura bells, stood up abruptly and approached.

"Ah! Although I can't tell from appearance whether you're the silent one or the one who talked to me before, but anyway, let me say hi first! Chief Shrine Maiden, thank you for your efforts! I've been working hard too!"

Noticing the shrine maiden approach, Yume was saluting energetically. Haruaki had no idea which bell she was, but the shrine maiden was apparently the one in current possession of the voice. She giggled lightly and said:

"That is truly wonderful~ Well then, Yume-sama, please allow me to say in fear in trepidation, my sister at the main shrine building has discovered a lost child~ Could you go over and help out~?"

"Of course! In other words, you want me to erase that kid's worries as a substitute mother! You want to rely on my womanly side! Normally, people only ask me for favors in changing light bulbs... Hohoho, looks like the meaning of my existence is not limited to height alone! The understanding people really do understand!"

"Then after arriving there, please let the child ride on your shoulders and wait at the same spot~ This is to allow his family to locate him easier~ In this regard, that is the great responsibility that only you can shoulder~"

"In the end, it's still my height that's being relied on—!"

Thus, the kagura bell (in the end, Haruaki still had no idea which one she was) led the depressed Yume towards the main shrine building. In any case, Haruaki hoped for a speedy reunion for the lost child and his family.

Everyone is working hard, so I must work as well—Just as Haruaki raised his broom again—

"Nuu, nice timing. Saves me time for waiting for that girl to leave."

Dressed as a shrine maiden, Fear looked warily in the direction that Yume had left and moved opposite to it, approaching Haruaki. Her shiny head of

silver hair was surprisingly a good complement for the red and white outfit, resulting in a wonderful fusion of eastern and western elements.

"Chihaya wanted to move something and needs a boy to help, so she asked me to call you."

"I see. Helping is fine, of course, show me the way now."

Fear reached a spot behind the shrine, in front of a building that looked like an old warehouse. The latch was already lifted and the warehouse's door was wide open. Crashing sounds of things bumping could be heard coming from inside.

"Hey~ I've brought the shameless brat."

"Then hurry and come in. Jeez, because it was randomly thrown in here earlier, I can't take it out now...!"

Exchanging glances, Haruaki and Fear entered the warehouse together. Probably because it was seldom opened, the interior was filled with damp dust and a musty smell. There also seemed to be no lighting available so it was quite dark inside with only the faint external light shining in from the door.

Chihaya was in front of a rack in the depths of the warehouse. Bending forward slightly, she was moving things off the rack and dumping them on the side. Her bottom, clad in that daring shrine maiden outfit, was thrust towards Haruaki and Fear. With her body leaning forward, the hakama was scrunched slightly at the sides, offering tantalizing glimpses through the slit that almost reached the depths between her legs. Too dangerous. Were it not for this darkness, it might very well be visible.

"You've arrived. I wanted to ask you guys to move what's on this rack, but there's a whole bunch of stuff in the way that needs to be moved away first—"

"Wait."

The one who spoke was not Haruaki but Fear. Due to the darkness, Haruaki could not see clearly but Fear's face had gone pale without warning and her body seemed to be trembling.

"A-Ahhhh— I-I've really... come to quite a treacherous place. This is bad, really bad... I was too careless. That presence. No mistake, that type of presence is here!"

"Hmm? Right, Fear, you—"

Completely stiff with tension, Fear slowly backed away.

"L-Leave the talking for later. This place is totally under their sphere of influence. They have been the actual rulers for many years. They could launch an attack any time, stepping in here was foolishness itself. I must escape without delay or else my life will be in danger..."

Scurry... Thud.

"Hwah! Hahaha! Houhyowahhhhhhh!?"

"Kyah! W-Why did you suddenly yell so loud!? Are you just happy or trying to be funny?"

"Uh, sorry. She's definitely just confused. Actually, she really hates spiders. I almost forgot until just now."

"Huhohhee~! J-Just now... A thud... Could it be... Uhaha, there's something moving on the back of my neck—!"

"Oh, figures. I was wondering just now why something seemed to fall from the ceiling. I get it now."

"Now is not the time to be saying something like that calmly... H-Hurry and get it off... Hurry... Eeeeeek, it's moving! Is it trying to spit silk at me or making a nest? Ahhhhhhhh!"

Fear kept jumping up and down, turning vigorously left and right, arching herself backwards and screaming severely.

"Hey, you're getting too worked up. It's just a spider. I'll get it off for you, just settle down—Ah, hey!"

Exasperated, Chihaya walked toward Fear but Fear was still in a state of turmoil. Probably focused on trying to get rid of the spider that had scurried under her clothing, Fear had pulled open the collar of her shrine maiden outfit. The overlapping part of the outfit in front of her chest was completely pulled apart, and due to her excessive force, even the hakama's sash was untied. As a result, Fear stumbled, tripping over her own hakama. The approaching Chihaya hastily caught Fear in her arms but could not withstand Fear's weight. Frantically, Haruaki also reached out to stop the two girls from falling but failed, ending up falling over himself.

Crash—Entangled with one another, the trio fell on the floor. A large amount of dust flew up and filled the air.

"Oww... Is it gone? Where has it run off to? Is it dead? No longer here? Hey Haruaki, help me look and check, please. Where is it, is it no longer there?"

Right in Haruaki's view were Fear's tearful eyes. Haruaki nearly stopped breathing.

(E-Even if you ask me to check, this is way too hard!)

Given the current circumstances, it was totally impossible to check—Fear's shoulder was bare, the shrine maiden outfit was barely hanging on her body, the hakama had almost slid off, and even her pale white thighs were wrapped around Haruaki's body.

"Hey... You... Bastard..."

For some reason, Haruaki's hand had passed under Fear's arm and was clutching Chihaya's breast firmly. His other hand had slid through the open slit in Chihaya's hakama and his fingertips could feel the sensation of her thigh.

A half-naked shrine maiden was pleading to him, her mind still in chaos. Chihaya was trembling all over, scolding him.

"H-Hey, how is it? How is it? Haruaki, look carefully!"

"You... How dare you...!?"

"J-Just wait, you two. Anyway, calm down first. Listen carefully, this is just a series of unfortunate accidents. Let's all calm down then solve the problem. First, I'll move this hand away... Hmm, Fear's body is in the way too much, it's almost impossible to move away! No wait, I can force it to the side like this. Hmm? I seem to have gotten caught on something."

"W-What are you doing!? If you move to that side, the hakama... will be... stripped off...! You're not satisfied with stuffing your hand into the hakama alone!?"

"Wait, you're mistaken! Because we're entangled together in this weird manner, it's like untying knots right now! First, Fear, you should get up first, no no, that's very bad if you got up like this, put on your clothes first... Wait, you can't straighten your clothes like this, get up first—"

Just at this moment, a person's presence appeared at the warehouse entrance. Haruaki turned to see a shrine maiden standing there.

Haruaki's brain was instantly shivering in terror. No, this was an accident. But even as an accident, if Konoha saw it, she might possibly slay him in one slice. Were it Kirika, who knew what consequences there would be. As for Kuroe, she would probably just snap photos like mad.

However, the one standing there was not any of these girls.

"Uh... Yasuzu, you are Yasuzu, right? Perfect timing! Hurry over here and help—"

"...(Smiling~)"

After seeing the situation in the warehouse, Yasuzu displayed surprise on her face for just an instant but immediately recovered the usual smiling demeanor. Then she nodded in comprehension but did not come over to help them. Suddenly, she knelt down next to the entrance—

Then cupping her hands behind her ears, she transmitted a certain message to her comrades.

"Ahhhhhhh! Hey, hold on! Why are you reporting to everyone!? Stop it, stop it right now! Or else I'll take out everything in my arsenal to make you pay the painful consequences! No, you've gotten the wrong idea! Arghhh, why are you looking so smug!?"

Yasuzu was simply smiling with unparalleled radiance, making a thumbs up gesture towards them.

She seemed to be saying: "I understand very well! I have already passed the message to everyone, asking them not to approach this place, so as not to disturb the three of you having your happy fun time!"

Part 5

While Lilyhowell was reading the manual and chatting intermittently with Neto, the bullet train reached its destination.

"Starting now, divide yourselves into small teams to move independently. Until the next command is issued, stay on standby at your respective hiding places."

Having issued orders to the others, Lilyhowell got into a taxi together with Neto after placing their luggage into the trunk. After she concisely informed the driver of their destination, the car quickly started moving.

"Heehee, hey look, shit man, there's a LCD monitor on the back of the seat, such high tech. I knew it, this country is both oriental and fucking cool. But there's just one thing that rubs me off the wrong way and that's the way this country puts fucking mosaics on their porn like they're paranoid—"

Although there was dialogue during the taxi ride, it was not very interesting. At least it was approaching the end. The taxi drove into the destination town, a very plain and ordinary Japanese town that could be considered a metropolis to some extent, but with lingering vestiges of greenery. As it so happened, they were currently traveling along a street where there was relatively more greenery. Neto suddenly whistled.

"Heehaw~ That's a very oriental shrine there! And it feels like they're holding some kind of festival!"

"I have heard that there exists a custom of having a picnic while admiring cherry blossoms in the country. This happens to be that time of the year."

"So it actually is a festival, heehee. Hey, I wanna confirm something—Is the destination close by?"

"Yes."

"Since there's no hurry at this stage and all we've been doing is riding transportation, besides, it's already lunchtime and I'm hungry... So, since there's a festival, there should be one or two things worth eating. Say, why don't we have lunch here and take a tour while we're at it? Not a bad idea, right? After all, I have never had a chance to visit this kind of place and since that 'Trash' should be carrying out the mission right now, let's relax and play while we're here. There shouldn't be a problem with us having a bit of fun during the mission. Let the sights and sounds of a Japanese shrine, a mountain and a festival to cleanse our hearts, heehaw!"

Lilyhowell honestly did not care but Neto had a point. Besides, if agreeing to his little suggestion would improve his mood and allow him to finish the rest of the job happily, it would be more than enough to compensate for her disinterest.

"Very well. I am a little curious too."

"How understanding you are, boss! Okay~ Driver, stop the car in front of that shrine there! Yeah, over there!"

Neto patted the driver on the shoulder many times. The elderly driver smiled in a pleasing manner and said in English:

"OK~ OK~ Stop, right? OK~ Thank you very much~"

Lilyhowell frowned.

"Neto, you know how to speak Japanese, right?"

"Oh, not great, but yeah. Because I love Japan, it's only expected. Heehee."

"In that case, converse in Japanese from now on."

Neto cocked his head. Hence, Lilyhowell approached his ear and whispered:

"I have been too careless. I was under the impression that knowledge of English was not widespread, but this driver is able to speak English despite clearly not having received formal education in English. That sort of 'they probably don't know English' mindset will lower our guard and increase the chances of leaking confidential matters. Conversely, as long as we intentionally converse in Japanese, our alertness in maintaining secrecy will rise accordingly."

Although she spoke seriously, Neto looked like he was suppressing laughter for some reason and said:

"Uh~ I get the feeling that this driver is simply saying a few random lines based on the situation, don't worry about it... But it's not like I can ignore the orders of the boss. I understand. This is what is known as 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do.' I won't say fucking asshole anymore. Uh... Using Japanese... It'll be raping butthole? Seems a bit weird but whatever. Okay, it's time for the best butthole violation!"

Lilyhowell had given up a long time ago on correcting Neto's choice of wording things. Probably startled by suddenly hearing Japanese, the driver showed a face of surprise as they handed over the taxi fare and got off.

"Then let's go, boss... Oh, 'when in Rome' blah blah blah. Addressed like a boss, it'd be... Ah, something like this? Heehee, Squad Leader Lilyhowell."

"I only switched languages to prevent this type of careless talking... Whatever, it should not matter currently. Here on, I wish you could act with greater prudence as the deputy squad leader, «Neto the Avenger»."

"Heeheeha~ Understood!"

—In this organization...

Normally speaking, the position of squad leader did not exist. Although normally organizations only existed naturally with the presence of leaders, such a position did not exist in this organization. The master entity was addressed by alternative means.

Conversely, this meant that "squad leaders" existed during unusual circumstances.

Namely, whenever a "squad" was formed. Limited exclusively to such cases.

Limited exclusively to special missions where members must form an organized group to take action, unlike normally—Only under the master's orders did they form temporary squads.

After being formed, the squads were disbanded upon the mission's completion. These groups existed only as anomalies, to accomplish the mission.

As was customary, the squads were numbered consecutively by their inception and labeled by using the name of the squad leader in charge, combined with the name of the deputy squad leader who assisted him or her.

Hence, the group who had just arrived in town were called:

The 87th Knight Squad, «Lilyhowell Neto».

Part 6

"Wow! Too amazing, it's all fluttery and shiny!"

"Ah, truly. Such beautiful cherry blossoms... At least we get a reward for working hard."

"Yes, Haru, do it now! Although 'Leave things to me here, you go first!' is a close second, I believe that all boys wish to say this at least once in their lives: 'But I find you even more beautiful.' Now is the perfect opportunity to say it, go!"

"K-Kuroe-san! Seriously, what are you talking about!? Cough... Glare~"

"But Konoha, you seem to be staring at me with very hopeful looking eyes!"

They were surrounded by a vibrant display of blooming cheery blossoms. At the spot where Chihaya had led them, there were no signs of other people in sight. Ordinary people probably would not go deep into the premises since this spot was reached by circling around Chihaya's house then walking deeper in the forest. By the way—

"...This is where we visited in January. That pond and temple are really familiar."

Hearing Kirika, Chihaya frowned with displeasure.

"W-What's with that tone of voice? It's like you're saying that you don't need me to lead the way if only I had told you guys earlier. It's your fault for not discovering this place."

"No, I wasn't trying to complain. Instead, I'm very thankful to you."

"This place—My feelings: the body can sense that it is a place filled with pure raama of the land. I never expected such a great place, truly quite an unknown. If possible, I wish to concentrate and meditate, becoming one with nature as much as possible—"

"Hold on... Are you going to undress? You're going to strip, aren't you? Over my dead body, I forbid it absolutely!"

It was currently noon time. Since they had brought their lunchboxes from the beginning, it was currently lunch time and according to the agreement, time for them to have the flower viewing. But the help Chihaya demanded included cleanup, apparently, hence they were obliged to work all the way until evening. As a result, all the girls were still dressed as shrine maidens.

Haruaki sat on a tarp, looking up in admiration at the endless canopy above weaved by the colors of white and pink. Whenever a pleasant cool breeze blew, the two mild colors would flutter and fly towards the blue sky. A faintly sweet fragrance could also be smelled when breathing. With the

sound of petals rustling, playing by their ear, the world before their eyes was like a dream or fantasy.

"Time to eat, time to eat, hurry and start the meal! Hey Haruaki, what's with you? Now's not the time for spacing out. If there ever was a time when the world will be destroyed if the lunchboxes aren't opened up quickly, surely it must be now! Oh no~ It's destroyed! Judging from the situation at hand, it's your fault that the current world is destroyed! How are you going to take responsibility!?"

"Guh! It's quite rare to find someone who fits the cliched saying so well about appreciating dumplings more than flowers...! Yes, fine, I'm hungry too after working. I've cooked a lot, so please eat as much as you want, everyone."

Just as Haruaki was about to open the lunchboxes, Kirika hastily presented her lunchbox and said:

"Hold on, don't forget that our original purpose was to try having a duel with a change of location."

"You're right, now that you mention it. Me, Cow Tits and Kuroe are already used to eating Haruaki's cooking, so it won't be fair for us to serve as judges. We won't be commenting."

"Yes, then I guess we'll need to trouble the rest of you to serve as judges. Please enjoy...!"

"I don't quite get the situation, but you can count on me! So, my seat is~"

"Okay, you hold it right there! Maintain your position on this diagonal line so that I can eat lunch in peace at least!"

"Aww~ Ooh~ That's so cold of you... But sitting opposite you, you can stare at your cuteness from the front! Fufu... I knew it, a shrine maiden getup is also explosively perfect...!"

Naturally, Shiraho and Sovereignty were sitting together while Chihaya nonchalantly sat on the other side next to Shiraho. Kuroe was also sitting near Sovereignty. The two of them were laughing about something together. On Haruaki's sides were Kirika and Konoha while Fear was staying on guard for Yume's movements. Un Izoey stared upwards blankly towards the fluttering cherry blossoms—

Opening the the lunchbox lid, Haruaki remembered Isuzu and the bells, so he turned his head. At least one of them was still present until just now. Next, Haruaki saw a shrine maiden not too far away, passing something to another shrine maiden. Then she returned to the shrine while the second shrine maiden carried the object here to the tarp.

"What's the matter? Isn't she going to join us?"

"Indeed, please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, not only Toohisuzu but also me, Isuzu, we don't need to eat lunchboxes! Although it looks very delicious and appetizing, there won't be enough if we all join in! So please don't mind us, everyone, because normally, we only eat randomly or even not at all~"

"Still, it doesn't sit too well with me. If anything remains, please help yourself. By the way, what did you just bring—Oh crap!"

Finally noticing what Isuzu was carrying in her hand, Haruaki was instantly rendered speechless. That's... That bottle is... No way—

"Ufufu, this was sent as a gift from a shopkeeper from the nearby shopping street to reward your efforts~ Since you are eating under these beautiful cherry blossom trees, of course, having some sake while admiring the flowers would add to the experience—"

"Hmm? I think I heard a word that tickles the depths of my heart..."

"Oh no! Fear, Kuroe! This is a state of emergency!"

"Cow Tits, I absolutely forbid you from transforming into your ultimate form! That liquid is the devil's water!"

"Defense! Defense!"

Fear and Kuroe pounced on Konoha to suppress her movements through physical force. Perhaps just going with the flow or due to their instincts as members of the Ladylike Bosoms Alliance, the two girls joined forces and went on the offensive extremely naturally despite the lack of prior communications, obsessively attacking the bulging shrine maiden's outfit. "What are you two doing!? Hey... hey! Stop... it...!" Konoha made sensual noises while struggling and twisting her body. The overlapping part of the shrine maiden outfit near the collar looked especially precarious.

"...? Uh, those girls over there seem to be especially occupied at the moment~? How about you, would you like some~?"

Isuzu presented the sake bottle towards—Kirika. Raising her eyebrows, she answered in a stiff tone of voice:

"We are still underage! Also... Umm, I must say that alcohol is... is a dangerous intoxicating substance that makes people lose control, possibly to the point of being unable to stop themselves from doing things they absolutely would not do normally! I already swore never to drink again... Seriously... Absolutely ridiculous!"

Perhaps remembering something, Kirika was speaking with her face bright red.

Part 7

"So, what do you think...? Sovereignty-kun and Shiraho-kun."

"Yes, very yummy! Both are so yummy! I can't decide which side is more yummy!"

"Seeing as Sovereignty said so already, I shall vote on a draw as well. To be honest, the lunchbox cooked by the human seems more appetizing, but due to the fact that I couldn't care less at all, I vote on a draw."

"I can't taste any subtle differences... So I'll follow Shiraho-san. Draw."

"If I had to judge—Hmm, this is totally not a draw! Both sides are explosively delicious, so it's a double victory! Who exactly are the ones who made these lunchboxes—!?"

The battle did not look optimistic. Kirika could not help but gnash her teeth. Although they called it a draw, this was simply because the judges were not interested in differentiating subtle differences in taste. Also, Shiraho's comment was virtually equivalent to casting a vote for Haruaki. Judging from the situation at hand, had Kana and Taizou been present, Kirika's defeat could very well have been declared already.

No, not yet. Kirika shifted her gaze. There was one more. One more person who could serve as a judge.

"...What do you think? Which side's lunchbox do you find more delicious?"

Un Izoey happened to be holding a fork like a child, stabbing the meatballs Kirika had cooked and sending them to her mouth. After chewing the meatballs a few times, she said:

"My answer: giving the opinion that I like this one better. Not words of flattery or courtesy, I add."

"What!? R-Really!?"

"My answer: yes. Because—"

This was an unexpected development. So what was it that had captured this girl's heart? Was it the meatballs? Or the plate of stew that she had carefully filtered off the dregs? Or her original secret recipe that she added to—

"Because this side's lunchbox contains more food that is round. I explain by giving the explanation that this is readily apparent. Take the rice balls for example, his are triangular but these here are more round."

Kirika instantly felt strength drained from her entire body. What point was there in winning due to the shape of food? Absolutely ridiculous.

"Hahaha, okay okay, what does it matter? Let's just call it a draw. I'm gonna start eating too. Class Rep's lunchbox... Hmm, so good! I'm not surprised it's a draw."

Calmly and casually, sitting beside her (because she had discreetly reserved the seat next to him, of course), he smiled while reaching his chopsticks into the lunchbox she had prepared. Haruaki looked so absolutely humble, excessively kind and a little infuriating... But Kirika still felt very happy to see him smile while eating her cooking.

And also a little cowardly.

"Hmph. This time, the biggest problem is that the judging panel is totally unmotivated. Of course I'm not satisfied with a draw. I declare this match void. Seriously, absolutely ridiculous..."

Grumbling, Kirika reached her chopsticks into a lunchbox to compare the taste. Judging by her own personal taste buds, indeed there was still a difference... Just a step away. She had lost. She must hone her skills further.

"By the way, Class Rep, when you were inviting everyone for a flower viewing, didn't you say you had something to talk to her about?"

Prompted by Haruaki, Kirika remembered as well. Looking at Un Izoey who was munching on meatballs, she said:

"Yes. But it's nothing special... No wait, this matter is very important indeed. I was just thinking, some time has passed already, so I wanted to confirm when a chance comes up. Tell us about Amanda's situation."

"My understanding: answering I understand what this is about now. I answer with the answer that timing is perfect. To report to you all, I just happened to load her photos yesterday."

After the incident before Valentine's Day, Amanda Carlot was handed over to the Lab Chief's Nation for protection. Although they had demanded the condition of being allowed to see her any time, absolutely ridiculously, they still had not met her directly ever since. The Lab Chief's Nation had explained that they hoped to give Amanda more time before exposing her to intense stimulation. At first, Kirika was highly suspicious whether they intended to go back on the promise but it seemed like it was true that the Lab Chief's Nation really did consider Amanda's health. Although Haruaki's group was unable to meet Amanda directly, as a substitute, they were able to confirm Amanda's safety any time through Un Izoey.

Un Izoey reached behind her waist and pulled out a cellphone from under the red hakama's sash. Speaking of which, did she keep her cellphone sandwiched between the sash and her bottom...? Absolutely ridiculous. He must be prevented from touching that cellphone at all costs.

The cellphone was given to Un Izoey by a superior (The woman called Rai? Or that guy?), so she was still unused to operating it. Despite having gone through this process a number of times, using the cellphone to confirm Amanda's recent condition, Un Izoey still showed no signs of progress.

Un Izoey extended the cellphone forward. "Lemme see, lemme see." Fear and the others also leaned forward to look at the screen. Shown on screen was a sickroom somewhere. A white-haired girl was pressing down her bed head.

'Hope... you can give me some time. I just woke up.'

'Of course. I'm still trying to remember how to use the camera.'

The image was shaking. The cameraman had apparently failed to notice that the cellphone was already recording. The white-haired girl's face appeared for a second then went off screen immediately. Next to appear was a white bed's sheets and an open window.

'...I can leave the hospital soon?'

'Very soon. Your rehab is going smoothly and your muscles are almost completely recovered.'

'Wonderful, I'm so happy... How are things on your side?'

'Everybody is in the same class. I report by reporting that it is very lively—My assertion: certain of completely remembering how to do it. Then I will start recording. Can I? So, I first press this button—'

Putz—

The video stopped here. Un Izoey tilted her head in puzzlement.

"...Oya?"

"Total failure in recording! You didn't remember at all!"

"It feels like after all that preparation, you ended up switching off the recording mode that you activated by accident! It makes me want to praise you instead, for being able to record a video with such incredible timing."

"Hmm~ Last time it was inexplicably upside down, so when can we actually watch a normal video?"

"...My apologies: giving a true sorry promise to reflect..."

"Whatever, that girl looks and sounds fine. Is it true that she can leave the hospital soon?"

"My report: reporting that this is the truth."

Sighs of relief were spreading among the members of the group. Kirika exhaled lightly as well.

In fact, Amanda Carlot's position was quite peculiar. What exactly was her relationship with this group here? What kind of existence was she now? There was probably no one who could answer such questions clearly. Even so, at the very least, Amanda was certainly a person they wanted to meet again.

"Nununu, I can't believe you guys are excluding us! Is it a rare film? No, it must be an erotic adult video! Guha! My neck is being strangled, I can't stand up! Hayahaya—!"

"Sneaking a peek at someone else's cellphone is too vulgar. Uh, Shiraho-san, you don't need to watch it?"

"I am not uninterested. Besides, I don't know that dark-skinned girl very well. In any case, it has nothing to do with me."

"You could try talking to her. I run into her occasionally in the public baths, so we're basically friends!"

In this manner, whether the cooking duel or checking up on Amanda's recent condition, both matters were concluded. Up next was viewing the flowers normally, eating lunch normally, all the while staying by his side.

(Hmm...)

The cherry blossoms overhead were extremely beautiful. Elegant, pretty and dream-like, watching the phantasm of white and pink, it felt like the lines between fantasy and reality were getting blurred.

Just at this moment, Kirika noticed something. She even thought she was dreaming. Could this possibly happen in reality? Yes, definitely. If under this canopy of cherry blossoms, surely it was possible.

She—Ueno Kirika who had made her decision to stand upon the battlefield—was she going to miss out on this chance?

The answer was already decided. Truly... Absolutely ridiculous.

"Hey, Yachi."

She forcibly controlled her voice that was almost about to tremble from nervousness, calling out to Haruaki. Calm down. This sort of thing was actually no big deal. Very common.

"Hmm? What's up?"

Leisurely as always, he turned his face towards her. Probably feeling satisfied after eating lunch, he was currently holding a thermos in both hands, sipping the hot tea inside. In other words, both his hands were occupied, so what she was about to do was absolutely not unnatural. She convinced herself once again. This sort of thing was very common.

Indeed, for couples, this sort of thing was very common—

"Umm... There's rice sticking on your face... I'll get it off for you."

"Eh? —Oh."

She used her finger to pick up the grain of rice sticking to the corner of his mouth. It felt like her fingertip touched his lip. Next—naturally—Kirika popped the grain of rice into her own mouth and ate it.

"~~~~!"

What to do? So embarrassing. But she did it. Indeed, she did it. Then so what? This was her going actively on the offensive in order to make progress. She did not need to feel guilty towards anyone.

Feigning composure, Kirika turned her gaze and started sipping tea as well. She hoped that her face had not turned red. But even if it did turn red, it mattered not. If only it could cause him to notice something. If only it could cause him to feel aware of her.

"Ah... Umm, th-thank you..."

"N-Not at all."

But she still did not dare look at his face. All she could do was keep her head bowed and endure for now.

Lifting her cup, she hid her face.

By the time she noticed—

There was a flower petal on her tea, giving off a faint fragrance.

Meanwhile, Fear was feeling inexplicably agitated.

Muku! She puffed her cheeks out. She did not know why except that she really wanted to puff her cheeks out. She really wanted to stuff her agitated emotions in her cheeks and be done with it.

The scene she had just witnessed merely consisted of Kirika picking a grain of rice stuck to the corner of Haruaki's mouth and eating it. Why was she feeling so angry? Why was she feeling so agitated?



(Hmm, hold on. Let me try a simulation.)

Supposing she were to do the same—

Was Haruaki going to make the same expression? Dazed, shocked, looking like his heart was racing—Was he going to do that?

Most probably... Not.

"An overt bid for victory... has already started? I have been too careless. To think I failed to notice first..."

Fear could see Konoha sitting beside her, narrowing her eyes while sipping tea, murmuring softly. Although Fear could not understand what Konoha was saying, she could not feel any anger and it seemed like Konoha was purely reprimanding herself for being negligent and careless.

In any case, simply from the way it looked, Haruaki was currently feeling his heart pounding because of Kirika. Fear could understand. Even as a girl herself, she also felt that Kirika was a terrific woman. However, putting that aside for now—

(Why wouldn't the shameless brat react the same way if I did the same thing...?)

Perhaps he might. But that would be speculation under her subjective wish. Using all her imagination more calmly and objectively, simulating that scene more seriously—She still reached the same conclusion: No. Even if the other person were her, Haruaki would surely not react with heart racing.

Doesn't he see me as a woman? —Fear wondered. But in the next instant, she reached a sudden realization.

(No no no, it's not like I hope for him to treat me as a woman, I'm simply talking about my ability and attractiveness! Yes! That guy thinks I'm still a child, right? He definitely has me pegged as unaware of human hardships. He has failed to correctly understand that I am a lady possessing otherworldly beauty with enough popularity that people might even want to form a fan club for me. This is what vexes me. That's right, I am infuriated by the shameless brat's insufficient understanding!)

Now it made sense why her cheeks were puffing out on their own. Nodding to herself, Fear walked off the tarp and sat down at a quiet spot on a cherry blossom tree's root so that she could think more calmly.

(Hmm... So, since the shameless brat is mistaken in understanding, I really ought to correct him. That guy should be making a shameless face when I take rice off, not just for Kirika. It's not like I want him to make that kind of reaction, but it's just because that reaction is perfectly natural, like cherry blossom petals falling down by the action of gravity, yes!)

Fear pondered for a way. Was there some kind of solution? To make Haruaki realize concretely that she was objectively a person with wonderful attractiveness...

"...Oh right, Kana and Taizou mentioned it. The finale at the welcoming festival is a school beauty pageant."

If she won that contest... Would Haruaki realize that she was actually very perfect, completely flawless, obviously a "woman" to anyone who saw her—?

"You're going to enter the school beauty pageant? I will cheer for you! And cheering very loudly at that!"

Her murmurs were apparently overheard. Appearing before Fear's eyes was the tall underclassman. Probably having learnt her lesson somewhat, she did not rush forward to hug Fear this time, or rub their faces together. Since Fear did not want to run around the place immediately after eating to her fill, so long as the girl did not do anything strange, she probably did not need to escape on purpose.

"Uh... Can I sit beside you?"

"Only if you don't do anything weird. I'm tired of running away so I'll compromise on small things."

"Awesome!"

Yume bent her knees lightly, folding up her tall body and sitting next to Fear. Grinning from ear to ear, she kept staring at Fear intently. Feeling kind of awkward, Fear took out her Rubik's cube and started rotating it, clicking away.

"Oh, it's a Rubik's cube. That sure brings back memories! Can you solve it?"

"I'm only able to solve one face. I'm simply taking it out to rotate randomly. Solving it completely needs technique... This is just an amusement tool for when I'm thinking, so it's not like I have to solve it."

"Hmm~ Thinking about something? Back to the subject, Fear-san, are you entering the school beauty pageant?"

Fear shook her head. The event simply occurred to her but she had not decided to enter.

"Oh~ Really, what a shame... Fear-san, it'll be a sure win for you! Everyone will surely bow down in front of your cuteness, Fear-san, it'll bring the fan club a step closer!"

"Y-You still haven't given up huh..."

"Of course. As soon as you give the go ahead, I'll do it instantly!"

Yume clenched her fists tightly while talking to her. Fear brought up a question that just occurred to her.

"Why do you... umm... like me so much? Uh, of course, I'm quite confident in myself, but that said, I still don't get why a girl like you would want to start a fan club."

"It's like the way people admire the things they don't have or seek the things they've lost. You see, because I'm a tall girl with long arms and legs, I see powerful weapons all over your entire body, Fear-san! Your petite build, your explosively cute appearance, and that head of silver hair, sleek and soft!"

"On the other hand, I wish I could be a bit taller. What did you eat to grow so tall? Did you drink milk like mad? Or eat some other food like mad?"

"Fufu, this is actually top secret! Besides, your petiteness is exactly what makes you cute, Fear-san, so if I tell you, that would end up betraying all of mankind. But Fear-san, I don't want to ignore your question and lower my affection points, so I'll take a middle path. Let me just give a hint—It's a certain type of all-purpose food!"

"All-purpose food? Is it something like nattou...? I'm not picky with food overall, but I'm only scared of eating nattou."^[1]

"Wrong guess~ Actually, I've been very short throughout elementary school with a shy and introverted personality. After switching to middle school, along with a change in environment, I started eating in great quantities that type of food which I never ate before, then my height blew up all at once. Yes yes, in terms of shape, it also feels like a prayer filled with hope to grow tall."

"This seems more and more like a riddle. But more than that, I'm more curious about how you used to be short, shy and introverted... Hmm~ It's quite unbelievable."

Fear glanced at Yume, causing her to cackle with laughter.

"W-What? That's creepy, you know."

"No no~ I was just thinking thank goodness I can talk with you normally, Fear-san!"

"Hmph, it's not like I'm an unreasonable person. I still can't accept it if you hug and rub me like a plushie on first sight, but if you face me calmly, I won't run away and could chat with you a bit. Because basically, you're one of my juniors."

Click—Fear stopped rotating the Rubik's cube. Speaking of which—

"Hey... You're Yume, right? I'll repeat myself. As long as you stay calm, I don't mind chatting with you. Yeah... Also, this is truly truly sometimes only, but it's not like letting you touch me is totally impossible."

"Really!?"

"However... There's one thing I'm very displeased about so this displeasure must be dispelled. Before coming here, I've never studied at a place like a school before—rather, I've never studied in this country's schools before—so I've never had that kind of relationship. Chihaya counts as another one, but from the way she looks, she doesn't intend to show me any respect, so it's not possible. In other words, you can try addressing me in some other way—"

"I got it! So that's what this is about... You want me to call you Fear-senpai!"

Senior. Senpai!

"H-Hoo... Although it's my first time being called that, it really doesn't feel bad at all..."

"Yay~! So the answer to bringing us closer was here! I was thinking that using the '-san' honorific would be more intimate but the correct answer is actually the opposite... What an overly simple blind spot! Fear-senpai! As proof that we've grown closer to each other, please tell me your cellphone

number! I absolutely won't make prank calls or send prank text messages, so please, you must tell me!"

Fear pretentiously deliberated before puffing her chest out arrogantly and answered:

"Fufufu. You leave me no choice... I shall agree to your request! Junior!"

To be honest—

Being addressed by someone as their senior for the first time, this feeling was very refreshing and delightful, to the point that Fear even felt that simply exchanging phone numbers was not a problem at all.

It was about time to clean up... Just as Haruaki was spacing out, staring at the cherry blossoms—

Ring—He seemed to hear the sound of bells.

Haruaki shifted his gaze slightly. Looking up at the sky, Isuzu suddenly froze. Next, Hauraki saw two of the kagura bells running here from the shrine. When the two kagura bells looked towards Isuzu who was already here, Isuzu nodded in response. Then she surveyed the surroundings with a troubled look on her face.

"Uh~ ...I suppose this ought to be done. There's no time left either~ So, Yume-sama, please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, I have a favor to ask of you~"

"Eh? Me?"

Yume was leaning forward, looking at Fear's cellphone. The two of them were exclaiming: "What a cute cat~!" "I know right!?" (When did they start opening themselves to each other in earnest?) Hearing Isuzu, Yume looked up with surprise.

"Yes~ Actually, it's currently necessary to suddenly enter deep into this forest to gather great quantities of a certain type of tree's leaves! Please lend us your assistance. You won't be alone since my sisters will be helping, so don't worry~ But these two younger sisters don't like to talk, so please don't mind them."

"Oh... Sure. But this is really sudden... No need to pull me, I'm going!"

The two kagura bells grabbed Yume's left and right arms respectively, forcing her to stand up then dragging her into the depths of the forest. As much as their faces displayed the usual smiles of gentleness, they also gave off a sense of commanding vigor.

After the trio vanished into the depths of the forest, Chihaya crossed her arms and approached Isuzu who was seeing them off.

"What happened? You're not telling that there really is something that requires the gathering of leaves, right?"

"That's because no matter what, she is an ordinary person~ As for the explanation, it's actually..."

Turning to face Chihaya, Isuzu's expression suddenly went stiff.

"—Chihaya-sama! Please be careful!"

"Eh?"

Apart from Chihaya who was stunned in surprise, everyone present noticed the reason.

Chihaya and Isuzu were standing at the edge of the forest. Consequently, a certain person emerging from the forest would first make contact with Chihaya. That was all there was to it, but perfectly logical.

"Hey hey hey! What's going on here!? Those slits are way too big, fucking... Correction, too raping sexy!"

A black man in dreadlocks suddenly appeared from the forest.

Furthermore, he had reached into Chihaya's red hakama from behind—in other words, through the wide open slit—impudently using his fingers to stroke her thigh.

Part 8

Apart from the black man, everyone was thunderstruck, or rather, dumbstruck as though time had stopped.

The first person to start moving was, of course—

"You... What are you doing—!?"

Face flushed red with anger, Chihaya turned around forcefully, raising her arm with all her strength. "Woah, no way, so fucking amazing! This shrine maiden isn't wearing pants—" Then she swung her fist and punched the muttering black man in the face directly. Not a slap but a punch. The crashing impact sounded quite terrifying.

"Th-That really hurts——! Seriously, it really hurts, raping butthole!"

Bending forward slightly to stroke Chihaya's thigh, the man suffered a direct punch from Chihaya and fell over backwards with a crash, rolling on the ground in pain. Chihaya's face was flaming red from anger and embarrassment.

"H-H-H-Hurting... you is exactly the point! That's obvious, you scum! Pervert, rapist! Die!"

"Arghhh~ ...Ouch, this really hurts. I'm the one in pain, you know? Calling me scum? It's your fault for wearing that kind of high slit outfit. If you dressed properly, I won't go touching you suddenly. Get it? Capish? It's very unfair that I'm in pain but you're not, right? That's very unfair. Is it completely my fault?"

Rolling in pain, the man grumbled and complained, slowly getting up, a massive bruise on his face. Despite coming from a girl's strength, it was a completely merciless straight punch suffered directly head on after all.

"A-Are you trying to pull something again!? I'll kill you, I'm really gonna kill you this time!"

"You'll kill me? Heehaw, what a painful yet funny joke. My mood is reaching a butthole climax! Heehaw!"

The man stroked the painful looking bruise. Just as he described, he was laughing in delight. Haruaki frowned while observing this black man. He was roughly thirty in age, wearing fashionable sunglasses, his hair woven into numerous small braids as dreadlocks. His clothing was baggy and comfortable while an old Polaroid camera was hanging on his neck. A tourist perhaps? However, he was not carrying luggage and his only belongings consisted of a guitar's hardshell case—But due to Chihaya's punch, it had rolled on the ground. In other words, this man gave off an impression like a reggae musician, touring around while being true to his personal desires. Just at this moment—

"Neto! I only took my eyes off your for an instant—What are you doing!?"

A young Caucasian woman in a business suit proceeded to walk out of the forest. Her blonde hair was tied behind her head. Her eyes were sharp and determined. Despite the beauty of her face, her expression seemed stern and commanding rather than cute. If the man named Neto was a musician, then this woman would be a capable manager or boss of some agency—But no matter which possibility, neither could explain the golf bag she was carrying on her back.

"Asking me what I'm doing? That's really tough to answer~ I asked you if I could take a walk in the forest and you said yes, right? Then I ran into this fated encounter, so thinking it was really a good chance, I wanted to get to know this shrine maiden, butthole deeply."

"I understand. However, what is with this situation? They are—"

The woman groaned as though realizing something. During this time, Neto had already picked up the camera hanging on his neck.

"Ahhh, ahhhhh, ouch, ouch ouch... Click."

"What!?"

Haruaki could not believe his eyes.

The bruise vanished from the man's cheek, the instant he picked up the camera and photographed the injury on his face.

The camera gave off faint operating sounds and quickly ejected a photo. Neto extracted the photo while kicking open the guitar case on the ground.

"Tsk... Neto! Wait!"

"I know, I know, heehaha! What does it matter? Just lemme do it, because it hurts and I was punched! What does it matter, it's just payback! Otherwise, I won't stand for this!"

While he was speaking—due to everything happening too suddenly, everyone was caught by surprise.

Using his foot to hook the object, Neto sent something from the guitar case flying into midair.

A gun. Not a handgun but a rifle of substantial length. A tool of murder, assembled from wood and metal.

Neto caught the rifle in midair, then in one flowing motion, he curled up the newly taken photo into a cylindrical shape and stuffed it into the rifle's magazine. Then like a gunman from a Western, he spun the rifle several times with one hand before pressing the muzzle on Chihaya's chest while she was rooted to this spot in shock—

Then he pressed the trigger.

The sound of the hammer striking was followed by the smell of something burnt. Haruaki simply sensed these. That was only natural, because stuffed into the magazine was just a photograph rather than bullets of lead.

Even so—

"Ah... G-Gah... Ahhhhhh!?"

Instantly, Chihaya collapsed on the ground, holding her chest. Staring wide-eyed, she screamed as though forcing all the air out of her lungs while cold sweat instantly broke out all over her body. She scratched at that "something" which had struck the chest of her t-shirt. Tugging at the fabric, the mounds beneath were almost spilling out of her collar.

"Hee~haw! Now that's truly delightful! How does it feel to get raped in the butthole by me!?"

Neto's body was trembling, evidently extremely excited. Without doing anything more to Chihaya, he knelt down in front of the guitar case.

"Hey, don't worry, that level of 'pain' won't kill anyone. It's lucky that you only used your fist to punch me just now. If it was a knife, then you'd have become a butthole that could never speak again. By the way, I normally use this thing to stab people for pleasure. Because firing a gun only takes an instant! Fun and pleasurable things should be enjoyed for as long as possible, of course!"

Saying that, Neto attached a blade under the rifle. In other words, it was a bayonet. Had that blade been attached just now—Thinking that, Haruaki could not help but shudder.

In any case, the instant Chihaya collapsed, everyone entered a complete state of battle readiness. Fear took out the Rubik's cube from under her shrine maiden outfit and said:

"That camera and rifle... They're both cursed tools, right!?"

"Heehaw, you're only half right! «The Paingrapher» right here is indeed a damned Wathe. Using this to photograph an injured spot will eliminate the injury from the body. The photo then becomes 'the information of pain itself.' Then by pressing the 'pain' photo against someone's body and ripping it, the other person will feel several times the original 'pain.' The effect is especially potent if used against the one who inflicted the injury in the first place. However, fixing photos onto the enemy and then ripping it would be too much of a hassle in battle. That's why I made this."

Neto turned the rifle while continuing nonchalantly:

"Of course, this gun cannot shoot several meters away, but it's so convenient. All it takes is a press of the trigger to shoot out the 'pain' from the photo ammunition. If the photo is placed in the magazine, that 'pain' will transmit to the bayonet. Quite a great function as well. In other words, this is a bayonet for making «The Paingrapher» easier to use—it's just a tool. Not some kind of rotten butthole Wathe."

"You sure like to flap your gums. But thanks to that, I understand something now."

"Indeed. Simply judging from your attitude... It's sufficient to guess who you are."

Kirika slowly extended the «Tragic Black River» from the sleeve of her shrine maiden outfit, adding anomalous black to the colors of red and white.

"Heehee, then who exactly are we?"

Just as Neto spoke while cocking his head disrespectfully—

"Like the way mountains can be cleared of lush vegetation by means of incineration and through the work of sharpened sickles, all sins will be gone, purely purified, and cleanly cleaned!"

"Ohoh—!?"

The wind was astounding. The air could be seen distorting, turning into formless vacuum blades carrying the sharpness of knives. Fallen on the ground, the cherry blossom petals all fluttered upwards. The raging wind proceeded to mercilessly tear off petals from the blooming branches, causing a rain of petals to dance rapidly in the air. The world was instantly

shrouded in the color of light pink, instantly obscuring Neto's figure from Haruaki's view.

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, who you are is irrelevant to me. Anyone who harms Chihaya-sama is our enemy. A divine oracle informed me that a certain unpleasant and harmful someone was about to arrive. All was fine up until after the uninvolved Yume-sama was led away. However, I am filled with regret that the voice did not speak of your destination. Had I known your destination, as soon as I saw your face, Isuzu would have done this."

Naturally, Isuzu was the one releasing the invisible sickles. The smile disappeared from her face, she kept her arm outstretched to release vacuum blades, staring intently at where the flower petals were flying. Haruaki could see behind her that Chihaya was trying to stand up while groaning weakly. She looked like she was okay. Haruaki breathed a slight sigh of relief.

Following Isuzu's gaze, Haruaki looked towards Neto's location. No matter what, that rifle should not be able to defend against the current violent storm of sharp sickles. He must have suffered quite some damage—

"Hehahaha, that really scared me! My butthole contracted!"

"What a surprising development. How should this be corrected?"

The blonde woman stood in front of Neto. Kneeling on one knee, she had reached into her golf bag and held a certain object in both hands, raising it up high. This must be how she blocked Isuzu's attack of vacuum blades. The golf bag's tattered remains were wrapped over the object, a giant mass of metal in a long and shape—A massive sword. Nevertheless, this sword's shape was very unusual. One edge was a sharp and straight while the other side resembled a comb, exhibiting saw teeth or sharp protrusions like inverse triangles.

"Say, Squad Leader Lilyhowell! Let me suffer the attacks! If you block them, I can't get any pleasure out of them! What does it matter? Hey, we're up!"

"Neto, calm down. This is still too early. Do not forget the mission."

The blonde woman swung the strangely shaped giant sword, stabbing it into the ground before her. Then with both hands on the sword's hilt,

standing legs apart at shoulder width, head raised, chest out—Her entire person seemed so dignified and imposing.

"Hmph, of course you must be that guy's companion. Very well. Do you really think the two of you can defeat us...!?"

"Hold your position, Fear-in-Cube!"

The blonde woman maintained her stance and shouted sonorously. Perhaps surprised by the volume of her voice or noticing something in her attitude of not taking any defensive measures, Fear stopped herself just as she was about to charge, Rubik's cube in hand. Konoha and the others also seemed to have decided to observe what the other side was up to first.

Who knew if the blonde woman was aware or not, but Neto was currently shrugging behind her back.

With candid fearlessness... Even candid to the point of excess, she glared at everyone—

Then as though she were a true knight, she declared in a tone of voice completely devoid of pretense or feigned kindness:

"I am a First-Class Orthodox Knight of the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion—Lilyhowell Kilmister! I hereby declare—We have no intention of fighting!"

For quite a while...

All that could be heard was the rustling sounds of cherry blossom petals.

"...?" She—Lilyhowell—tilted her head slightly in puzzlement towards this silence. Then recalling something as though going "oh, I see now," she nodded and added:

"Also, this man is a First-Class Revenge Knight, Neto the Avenger. We are currently the only ones here."

This sort of thing was obvious. That was not the issue.

"N-No no, what you declared just now is a bit weird."

"Th-That's right. As an organization, you guys of the Knights' Dominion are supposed to reject the existence of cursed tools like us. Even if you say

you have no intention of fighting, how could we possibly believe you so easily!?"

"Precisely. One, we are an organization for destroying Wathes. Two, you are Wathes. In that case, one can conclude that we will eventually cross swords one day. However, we currently have no intention of engaging you in combat."

Lilyhowell repeated herself again, causing Konoha to frown.

"What are you talking about? Clearly you suddenly attacked Chihaya-san just now."

"—That was this man's joke. On further examination, although this girl is an owner of a Wathe, she is human. All things considered, we are at fault for this incident. I hereby apologize to everyone."

With her hand on the sword's hilt, chest raised, Lilyhowell bowed her head towards them to express her apologies. She felt very serious, but too serious, instead giving off a kind of airheaded impression.

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, even if you apologize, whether or not we forgive you is a separate matter."

"How rare, my flunkie actually spoke out perfectly what the master wanted to say...!"

Chihaya stood up while brushing away Isuzu's hand that had just been supporting her shoulder. Although her footsteps were still a little unsteady, her eyes were burning with raging flames.

"Hmm~ ...I don't quite get it. In the end, why are you guys here?"

"If you ask why, my answer is coincidence. We are simply visiting the shrine's festival."

"How absolutely ridiculous. Then let me rephrase the question. Why did you come to this country?"

Kirika's question prompted Lilyhowell to glance at Neto behind her. He was originally just tapping the rifle against his shoulder. Instantly, for some unknown reason, the atmosphere suddenly changed dramatically. The madman's smile disappeared, leaving an expressionless face that carried airs of cruelty. In a deep voice, sounding like it was forced out, he said:

"...Not funny at all. But looks like we have no choice but to tell them about that woman."

"Then I shall speak. Our goal as the 87th Knights Squadron is to exterminate the «Knight Killer»."

"The Knight Killer...? What's that?"

"Literally what the name says, a person who kills knights. To this date, a single human has killed dozens of knights belonging to the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion. Although the purpose of our organization's existence is to destroy Wathes, we are also obliged to avenge our murdered comrades."

"Just a single person...? Sounds like someone really strong."

"Precisely. But regarding the enemy, we only know two facts. One, she calls herself Nirushaaki. Two, this «Battle Demon Nirushaaki» is ranked second in the Draconians. That is all. Not much."

Haruaki's group gasped. The Draconians. An organization devoted to the singleminded pursuit of strength. Ranked second would naturally imply being second strongest in the organization. Even stronger than that Kokoro Pentangeli.

"...I see. Then stop wasting your time in this kind of place and eliminate that Nirushaaki person. You are our enemies. The Draconians are also enemies. We're not going to stop you."

"As much as we would like to do so, there are difficulties in circumstance."

"That's right, it's not funny at all. We woulda done it if we could. But that bitch keeps a mask on at all times so no one has seen her real face. Almost no one has heard her voice either. All that can be deduced from body shape is that she's a young woman. Apart from that, you can say there's no other information."

Neto was muttering in a terrifying and ice-cold tone of voice. Beneath those sunglasses, it was impossible to see where his eyes were directed and only cold, murderous intent passed through.

After Neto finished, suddenly changed in atmosphere, Lilyhowell went "There is one more problem" and continued:

"The problem is that she is rumored to have deserted the Draconians."

"...What did you say?"

"She deserted the organization. Her movements were erratic to begin with, strong and fierce, simply appearing and vanishing elusively but meaninglessly, a battle demon akin to a natural disaster—This is the existence known as Nirushaaki. Hence, I consider a sudden withdrawal from the Draconians not entirely impossible. That said, these thoughts are accompanied by doubts of 'why'?"

"She deserted the Draconians huh... Then you people appeared here... No way?"

Kirika had apparently realized something, frowning suddenly. Lilyhowell nodded.

"Your deductions are most likely correct. One deserter of the Draconians might have already approached another deserter of the Draconians. In other words, rumor has it that she has entered Taishyuu High where you attend."

"Hey... Hold on! If that really happened, the superintendent can't possibly have kept us in the dark!"

"No, Yachi. The superintendent himself could be unaware of this woman's existence. If she considered the current situation of the superintendent's faction and treated them as backup reinforcements, only to lend their strength when really necessary, it is very possible for her to hide in school as an ordinary new student for now."

"Muu... In other words, what the heck is going on...?"

"Your brain is a little slow, Wathe. Totally not funny—Oh crap, as soon as I recall that rotten bitch, I start getting serious. Listen up, that «Knight Killer»... is to this date the only butthole bastard who has injured my body but still evaded my revenge! Because I wanna kill and rape her so much, simply remembering that bastard fills up my mind with this matter, I even forget how to laugh! Like an inexperienced brat who can't stop thinking about the first night he slept with a woman, what a bad habit!"

Halfway through, Neto suddenly recovered his beginning tone of voice. Patting himself on the forehead, he laughed out loud—What a bipolar man. It looked like his hatred and resentment towards that «Knight Killer» was truly as extraordinary as he claimed. Resuming his original, manic tone of voice, Neto said:

"Anyway, I am dedicating everything towards revenge so that I can give butthole climax to the butthole bastard in your school. Although I don't know what she looks or sounds like, raping that bitch's butthole is my goal! Heehaw, isn't that very simple?"

"I repeat. Our goal is to exterminate the «Knight Killer». But of course, our superiors have not forbidden us to destroy you. You are simply not our primary objective. Should you hinder us, we will fight you without objection... Considering this possibility, please do not underestimate the combat strength of our squad, numbering a total of sixteen."

To be honest, Haruaki felt very troubled by what they said. Let alone hindering them, he still had no idea how his group should act. Neither did he know what the other side intended to do specifically.

"Hey, umm... I understand that our school might be where your target for vengeance is lurking. But you guys don't know what she looks like, right? So how do you plan on finding her?"

"That's a great question! I have a way. The 'pain' that bitch caused me in the previous battle—in other words, the photo taken using «The Paingrapher»—I've been keeping it safely. So, remember what I just said? If the 'pain' on the photo is returned to the one who inflicted it, the resulting 'pain' will be multiplied. When that happens, the pleasure I feel is also multiplied, in other words, there's an added effect! Because I only have one photo where that bitch made a butthole out of me, I can only put it into the magazine and stab using the bayonet. I'll just have to try each and every high school girl at your school, one at a time! So that's the plan, the bitch who causes me the most excitement will be that lovable butthole bastard!"

"Y-You bastard...! In other words...!"

"Using a bayonet to stab every student then deciding based on pleasure? How absolutely ridiculous a method!"

"Heehaha, an absolutely ridiculous method huh...? I agree. If I had to ambush kids on the way home from school, making buttholes on these barely weaned high school girls one by one, that'd be an utter pain in the ass—"

The blade pressed against Neto's neck forced him to stop speaking. But it was not Fear's torture tool nor Konoha's knife hand. Most likely having

received orders to remain neutral towards the Knights' Dominion, Un Izoey simply stood where she was without moving, so it was not her knife either.

Instead, it was the giant sword belonging to Lilyhowell who was supposed to be his teammate.

"—Neto, I will not permit unnecessary violence."

Staring at the giant sword blade, Neto giggled lewdly.

"But our dear Squad Leader Lilyhowell doesn't like this butthole-like method. So what shall we do?"

"...I am truly ashamed to say this, but my hand is forced. Hence, I have decided to negotiate with your group."

Looking clearly displeased, Lilyhowell stabbed the giant sword into the ground again. Then she turned towards Haruaki's group.

"One, find the «Knight Killer» by any means necessary. Two, kill her as soon as possible. These are our objectives. However, due to personal principles, I wish for the process to reduce the involvement of the ordinary populace as much as possible."

"Don't be absurd. Didn't that man just say that the only plan you guys came up with must involve ordinary people, checking them one by one!?"

"Precisely, but that applies to us only."

Lilyhowell continued to frown slightly and narrowed her eyes as though suppressing her displeasure deep into her heart, then said:

"But being students in the same school, you are in a better position to gather far more information than we could, hence there might be other methods. So I propose a deal—if your side can locate «Knight Killer» Nirushaaki and hand her over to us, we will return to the Knights' Dominion without harming any other people."

"Let me ask this first... Does that include Fear and the others?"

"Indeed. One day, we will likely destroy Fear-in-Cube, but not now. Currently, our first priority is to avenge those who fell victim to the «Knight Killer». Your group can be ignored for now."

"Heehahaha! Oh dear, what a great idea. In other words, shoving the troublesome part onto others to handle. Say yes now, say yes now. If you

say yes, we can relax for a while until the target is captured. If you don't, I'll have to undertake the pain in the butthole task of testing—Trying my blade on female students. Also if you guys come running to get in my way, I'll have to fight pointlessly before the prey is caught. Heehaw, really troublesome to the extreme. Yes, simply destroying Wathes is already a butthole game that brings out my best mood!"

Neto burst out laughing. Lilyhowell's eyes looked sincere. The members of Haruaki's group exchanged glances.

"What an absolutely ridiculous deal. However..."

"If we agree to it, the ordinary students will be spared. If we reject it, perhaps people will get hurt."

"How troubling, this is totally not a deal at all. It is almost a threat... How infuriating."

What about after agreeing? How exactly should they proceed? Of course, Haruaki's group had no idea at all. Nevertheless, they understood one thing—namely, in order to protect the safety of innocent students for now, they must agree to the other side's terms.

"Does this attitude imply understanding? Excellent judgment. So, the deadline is one week from today."

"Please wait. That's a bit too short...! We still have no idea how to find her!"

"Hee~ Ha~ Ha! That's none of our concern!"

"I know the address of the Yachi residence. We will be paying a visit one week later at midnight on Sunday. Before that, please locate Nirushaaki. Do not worry, I shall not allow fresh blood to stain your front door immediately."

Mixed with cherry blossom petals, soil flew lightly into the air. Lilyhowell had drawn her giant sword from the ground and rested it against her shoulder. Then she turned and walked back in the direction where she came from. Neto also threw his rifle into the guitar case as though tossing it away, then picked up the case and chased after Lilyhowell.

Several seconds after the two of them disappeared into the forest, noises were heard from behind. The group looked back in surprise.

"Ding ding ding~! The leaves gathering expert has returned~! Yes~ Although it only felt troublesome in the beginning, after gathering so many leaves, I still end up with a sort of explosively fulfilled sense of accomplishment!"

Before their eyes were two shrine maidens accompanied by Yume who was carrying a large pile of leaves in her arms. Speaking of which, in order to keep Yume the ordinary human uninvolved, Isuzu's sisters had attentively taken her away from the scene.

In any case, at least that goal was achieved—Isuzu exhaled as though saying that.

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, you must be exhausted, oh my oh my, to think you picked up so many~"

"Mufufu, I don't mind at all if you praise me more~ Say, I'm really hoping for praise from Fear-senpai! So, although it's a bit late for me to ask now, what's the point of collecting these leaves? Could it be that you'll act like a mysterious shrine maiden and pour it into a pot to cook ancient secret remedies?"

"Ah, well~ Uh~ Umm... Umm~"

Isuzu's gaze wandered until she finally clapped her hands together as though coming up with an idea.

"These leaves have sharp ends, right~?"

"Yeah, it's a little prickly! Could there be some kind of mysterious power inside?"

"Actually, a leaf pricked my finger just now, ouch, so to vent my anger, I intend to burn all of them~"

"Eh?"

Part 9

On the way back to the Yachi home from the shrine, Haruaki looked up at the darkening sky and muttered:

"Things have become very serious."

"Jeez, damn the Knights' Dominion. It'd be so much better if it was purely an attack!"

Fear concurred with her arms crossed in displeasure.

After the flower viewing, the two members of the Knights' Dominion had left. After they finished helping with the shrine's work, Haruaki's group took their leave to hold a strategy meeting as soon as possible. Apart from the residents of the Yachi home, this included Kirika as well.

As a member of the Lab Chief's Nation, Un Izoey had apparently received such orders: "Remain neutral as much as possible in the face of other organizations." Hence, she said: "My explanation: I think I should be unable to help..." Then she took her leave with inexplicable forlornness. As for Sovereignty and Shiraho—"Uh, is there anything I could help—" "Nope." Then the former was forcibly dragged home by the latter.

After discreetly asking Yume to head home first, they had discussed with Chihaya and Isuzu for a while. Ever since encountering them in January, Haruaki's group had only glossed briefly over the existence of multiple organizations that targeted cursed tools. But now that one of them had appeared before them for real, it was necessary to explain again clearly.

In the end—presumably not taking after her revered Shiraho as a role model—Chihaya chose not to take special action. Haruaki's honest feelings believed that since a dangerous existence like the Knights' Dominion had appeared, in the interests of safety, he hoped that Chihaya and Isuzu could keep a greater distance away from them. But since Chihaya had chosen non-interference, he could not force her. Besides, Isuzu possessed outstanding abilities in the domain of "protecting oneself." Hence, all he could do was remind Chihaya and Isuzu to contact them as soon as possible if anything came up.

"The Knights' Dominion is here. Their target is a former Draconian who has currently entered our school. So, what should we do? Although back then, we had no choice but to agree to the deal."

"Muuhmm~ Deserted means that she can currently be considered an ordinary person, right? Is it really right to hand her over to those two...?"

This was the dilemma. The Knights' Dominion had said: "So long as you hand her over, we will not harm other students." But the person known as the «Knight Killer»—were they able to sacrifice her? Were they able to treat her as an abandoned pawn to keep the other students safe?

"Hmm~ In hindsight, instead of listening to their explanation, we should have beaten them up on the spot until they couldn't stand up anymore. I lost all motivation because that woman said so seriously that they had no intention of fighting. This could very well be part of their devious plans!"

"To be honest, I think so too... Had we done so at the start, things would be a lot simpler."

"Don't say something so unsettling. When fighting and killing are concerned, it's still best to avoid battles as much as possible."

While they were discussing, the group reached the front of the house. Then they stopped. This was not because they were waiting for Haruaki to unlock the main door. Even Haruaki himself stopped walking.

This was because the two figures standing before the door were too unexpected.

One of them was a girl with relatively short hair. As soon as she spotted the returning group, she started trembling violently in apprehension for some reason, hunching her tall stature behind the other person's back. Her cheeks were scarlet while tears were welling up in her eyes. The other person, far shorter than the cowering short-haired girl, had a petite and slender build with her hair styled into two buns, a large pouch at her waist, dressed in a sailor-style school uniform—

"—Hello everyone, it's been a while. Trust you have been well?"

Showing an innocent smile no different from before, Ontenzaki Satsuko greeted them.

Chapter 2 - Spring Day / Together With You Somewhere / "Nice to meet you, Ms. Nobody"

Part 1

The current location was a newly built, detached house. The wallpaper gave off a smell of newness. Since this house was nearing completion, one could conclude with certainty that this home's single daughter had applied for the private high school near the house rather than the high school division of the middle school she had been attending.

Both that single daughter yet not that single daughter at the same time, Laurica "Trash" Shoegazer was currently sitting at the brand new dining table. The sparkling table surface was completely spotless. The family who were supposed to enjoy this brand new environment were not present. Bound by their hands and feet, they were locked away in a room on the second floor.

"Laurica Shoegazer, have you fed them yet?"

"Y-Yes... I've been feeding them three meals a day!"

Sitting opposite her was a gallant blonde lady, Lilyhowell Kilmister. Renowned for her strength and noble character, she was the knight whom Laurica idolized. Also, perhaps Lilyhowell had forgotten already, but she had also saved Laurica's life once and was also the reason why Laurica joined the Knights' Dominion. Simply being able to be here, face to face with Lilyhowell, was causing Laurica's heart to race and her cheeks to blush. For someone as useless as her to be able to share the same space as her idol, it was almost like a dream. And the reason this miracle was realized was because she was an auxiliary who mainly supported Neto and also due to the Wathes in her possession that happened to be useful for this mission.

"Heehaw, I already said that calling her 'Trash' is enough. Do we have to feed them every time? Such a pain in the ass, just kill them instead."

"They are ordinary townsfolk. I forbid you to harm them."

"Yes yes. But isn't this very contradictory? In that case, don't do it in the first place."

"I understand. But having done something wrong absolutely does not imply that everything that follows is wrong. We do not represent justice. There are times when we must take on the guise of evil depending on the situation, even to the point of being decried by others as insane. Nevertheless, maintaining purity of heart definitely has its meaning. That is what I believe."

"Heehahah, basically what they call God is watching us. That's so raping buttholes."

Putting his feet up while sitting on the sofa, Neto shrugged, in the middle of watching television.

"—So, are there any problems? Please speak up and we will act to provide assistance."

"N-None at all!"

"How fortunate. Then please continue to work hard in carrying out the mission. That is all. Today's regular meeting is adjourned. Please contact the other members of the squad and maintain the status quo for now."

Smooth, tender lips. She's asking me to work hard in carrying out the mission. Is she encouraging me? I'm so excited. I will do my best. I may be "Trash" now but I don't want to be "Trash" forever. One day... I must... become like her.

"Laurica Shoegazer, what is the matter?"

"Hyah... Y-Yes! Sorry! I will contact them immediately!"

Accidentally spacing out. After she responded frantically, Lilyhowell turned her head slightly and spoke gently:

"—Looks like you are exhausted due to being unaccustomed to this mission. Get some rest earlier tonight."

Saying that, Lilyhowell turned her gaze back to her hand. Spread out before her was a blu-ray recorder's instruction manual that she had found somewhere in this house. Was it that interesting to read? A person like her really possessed interests that ordinary mortals could not comprehend. No, wait, did she just worry about me? Gentle words spoken simply out of worry for me? I'm so happy! I can die without regrets!

However, she could not die yet. Feigning composure, Laurica operated her cellphone and sent messages as part of regular reporting to the other "squad" members hiding elsewhere on standby, outside of this house.

The operation was going smoothly as planned. Continue to stay on standby until further orders—

Just as she sent this text message, the doorbell rang at the entrance. To avoid rousing suspicions, Laurica went to answer the door. It was an old lady who lived next door, bringing a neighborhood notice. Laurica used her other identity that was not Laurica, bearing the face replicated faithfully from another person by a Wathe, she met the lady and accepted the notice. But just at this moment—

Thud thud, a banging noise came from above.

It was someone struggling violently on the second floor. In other words, the original inhabitants who were now being imprisoned. They must be trying to call for help after hearing the doorbell.

"Oh my... What's that noise?"

"Ah~ Uh, it's daddy working on renovations! Sorry for being so noisy here."

"I see. Oh right, I haven't seen your parents lately—"

"Just in case, let's erase three minutes."

"Eh? Just now... Whose voice was that..."

The woman turned her head but Laurica ignored her and did what she was supposed to. Since Lilyhowell had spoken already, it meant that she had to do this. There was an element of bad luck this time, but it could not be helped.

Laurica took out a mask from her front pocket, a small mask covering the top half of the face, similar to the ones used in opera performances. On the position of the eyes, there were red glass beads.

This was the Wathe known as the Eyes of the Inquisitor of Salvation, «Bartolomey Oblivion». It was also one of the reasons why she was "Trash."

After wearing the mask, Laurica's view was dyed red, filtered by the red glass beads. Grabbing the head of the woman before her, she meditated

forcefully, hurrying before the victim could struggle or scream out. Three minutes, just three minutes!

The woman's eyes instantly lost focus. At the same time, Laurica felt a sharp pain in the depths of her own face. The feeling was like something was stabbing into the depths of her eyeballs. She desperately suppressed the sudden surging wave of nausea.

After calculating the time, she released the woman and placed the mask back into her pocket. If the duration was three minutes, it did not take too long for the erasing process to complete. However, her own headache did not go away. Laurica continued to endure.

"...What... happened to me... Oh right, I came to bring over the neighborhood notice. I must be getting old, it feels like I spaced out just now. Ufufu. Then thank you for your troubles. Please send my regards to your parents."

Probably because the light at the entrance was quite dim, it was fortunate that the woman did not see the extreme pallor of Laurica's face. Having lost three minutes of memories, the woman had already forgotten the banging noises from the second floor, as well as the surfaced question about this family's parents. Erasing at most thirty minutes of memories from the target—This was «Bartolomey Oblivion»'s cursed power. A tool so contemptible that it was nauseating. Wathes plunged people into misfortune and were definitely not convenient tools. A type of tool that ought to be destroyed. Her head was hurting so much. Nevertheless, she had no meaning of existence apart from using tools of this category. Hence, she was "Trash." Naturally, Wathes carried curses. Hence her head was hurting. Simply erasing three minutes' worth of memories was causing her such a headache that she felt like her mind was being crushed and shattered. In the past, she would always use this tool to clean up the aftermath when Neto crossed too many lines and was witnessed by others. However, this time was different.

As the price of using «Bartolomey Oblivion», her headache went over the limit. Laurica fainted. Regardless the duration of erasure, her brain would be forced to shut down by the unbearable pain. The only difference was how long she remained unconscious until waking up. As her body stumbled, her memories were interrupted here—

"Are you okay, Laurica Shoegazer?"

When she opened her eyes again, she found that particular person's face before her. Lilyhowell Kilmister. The exalted knight whom she idolized and her savior as well. Compared to Neto who always left Laurica unattended every time she collapsed, what a kind and gentle person she was.

"Y-Yes."

Laurica wanted to be with her, wanting to become like her.

She wanted to become a knight. Not an auxiliary. One day eventually, she wanted to become a knight.

"Very well. I shall tie up the residents in the second floor more securely. I apologize for making unexpected work for you due to the sudden situation."

"No... I will... try my best. I... will try my best."

Held in the arms of the knight whom she idolized, Laurica Shoegazer vowed in her heart again. She must make this operation a success, causing the surrounding people to recognize her as a useful person and no longer "Trash." This was the first step towards becoming a knight. It was also the first step towards approaching the knight whom she idolized.

So today, she was going to fulfill her duties with full effort as well. Turning into a certain person that was not herself, she fulfilled her duties.

In her mind, she kept repeating the name of the role she was playing.

Year 1 Class 3, Kagidou Himeno.

That was her current name.

Part 2

"Y-You're Satsuko!"

Haruaki's group instantly prepared themselves for battle. Satsuko frantically waved her hands.

"P-Please wait—! Listen to Satsuko first, she's not here to fight everyone~! Indeed, Satsuko wants revenge, but the fractures just healed and are still recovering, plus Satsuko's level is still pretty much the same as last time! Umm... You people may have trouble believing someone like Satsuko, but please, listen to Satsuko..."

"Hmph, you're right. We can't trust you at all. You've already deceived us once."

"No way... Satsuko really has no intention of fighting~ And not carrying any weapons either. Also—That's right, Satsuko expected you might say this, so she persuaded this child here!"

Satsuko pushed the other girl, the one hiding behind her back, forward.

"Hueee, hawawawa! S-Satsuko, so embarrassing...!"

The girl was quite tall but especially baby faced. She looked kind of familiar. Although she was dressed in cute girly clothing, part of her hair was dyed in vivid colors like a member of some band. It did not quite match her cowardly temperament.

Hmmmmm? When Fear looked at her from the right, she screamed "hiwawawa" and used Satsuko as a shield to hide on the left side. Mumumu? When Kuroe observed her from the left, she went "hiwawawa" and hid on the right... This was never ending.

"Hmm~ Somehow I think I've seen this girl before."

"Yeah. I feel like I'll remember soon. Watch as I relentlessly give her 'the stare'!"

"Eeeeek! Don't look... Please don't look—! S-S-So embarrassing...!"

Konoha and Kirika both sighed respectively.



"Speaking of which, something like this did happen before."

"Yes. Although just for an instant, she did exhibit this type of personality. How absolutely ridiculous."

"Satsuko will still explain the proper answer. She is Fourt. Fourteen Coonsberry."

Haruaki remembered the name as well. A member of the Draconians. The cursed house in Satsuko's possession.

"Muumuu, the image is really different from last time. Is it really her?"

"But she does act something like this when the curtain over her face was lifted... Then again, her hair is different from before, it's been dyed a bit."

"Oh, somehow it became like this after Satsuko hired workmen to repair the roof~ Maybe it's because the materials are different. If the roof was replaced completely, it might be more unified... Hmm? Hyah!?"

Under Fear and Kuroe's intent gazes, probably unable to bear the embarrassment any further, Fourteen went "hawawa, awawa~" and tearfully looked around, finally finding something extremely close by to alleviate her sense of embarrassment—Then she covered her face with that piece of fabric.

"Phew. This solves the question of those who are doubting whether I am someone else. I am myself. Allow me to say hello again, everyone. Also, Satsuko, replacing the roof completely is too frightening, please allow me to refuse firmly—"

"Hey! Fourt, don't speak while using someone else's skirt to cover your head~!"

Fourteen had stuffed her head between Satsuko's legs, using the skirt as a curtain, presenting a scene that looked completely perverted. Naturally, Satsuko instantly pulled her skirt away.

"Ah... Hiwawawa, all open... if seen, all exposed... t-too embarrassing...!"

"So here, Satsuko has lifted Fourt's curtain from the start, or rather, removed the curtain. So Satsuko hopes that everyone understands that she really has no intention to fight!"

"Yeah... Under these circumstances, it really doesn't feel like a fight is possible."

Fourteen was trembling while pressing herself tightly against Satsuko. As a result, Satsuko probably could not fight on her own. Haruaki's group had no choice but to agree that they had not come to fight. However, they still could not lower their guard.

"So, back to the main subject... Simply stated, Satsuko came here to make a personal request. As much as Satsuko knows, Fear-san and the rest of you have no obligation to listen to someone like Satsuko..."

"Yeah, there's none. But this timing is quite concerning. We'll at least listen to what you have to say—Go on."

"S-Satsuko is truly thankful! Actually... Satsuko heard that a senior who has left the Draconians is currently at the school where you attend. Also, that senior seems to be targeted by the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion... So... Umm, Satsuko wishes to seek some assistance from you. Because that senior is supposed to have abandoned Wathes as weapons, not fighting anymore, only wishing to live a calm and peaceful life."

Haruaki's group looked at one another. They already felt a premonition and it turned out to be related as thought.

"The other side mentioned the «Knight Killer» and «Battle Demon», right? The woman named Nirushaaki."

"Yes... But how did you know?"

Satsuko asked, blinking repeatedly. Fear crossed her arms.

"Because those guys from the Knights' Dominion arrived one step before you. They already told us the basic situation."

"Oh, so that's what happened! That means there's even less time. Please everyone, you must—"

"Absolutely ridiculous. If you suddenly ask for assistance, we're not going to agree right away. Allow us to confirm and ask questions first."

"Yes. First of all, what I'm curious about is that this person is quite a powerful character, right? For someone like that to desert the organization, does it happen often?"

"This actually doesn't happen often. So it's quite a commotion on our side too. But the Draconians are quite keen on individualism. It's up to you if you want to leave—That's the Commander's final decision. Also, Nirushaaki-senpai was originally an extremely elusive person to begin with... When she suddenly quit the Draconians, everyone was very surprised of course, but it also felt inexplicably understandable."

"You guys never thought about imposing sanctions?"

"If she fled together with valuable Wathes, perhaps some people might challenge her, wanting to test their strength or to raise their rank... But since she abandoned her combat power before escaping, to be honest, someone like that would be considered a loser by the Draconians. So basically, they don't really care about her. Satsuko failed to do enough homework last time and didn't know until now, but the superintendent at your school is also a former member of the Draconians, right? You'll understand just by looking at how he and his subordinates are safe. To the organization, deserters are irrelevant existences. We won't attack them without reason."

"Speaking of which, I've never heard about the superintendent's faction getting pursued or attacked by the Draconians... Although he hides his face behind a gas mask, it wouldn't be surprising for him to be discovered long ago if the Draconians really wanted to find him."

Haruaki muttered quietly. Besides, Zenon and Ganon did not even hide their faces. Summing up these thoughts, it was clear that the superintendent's side was not particularly concerned about pursuers.

"Then that makes your request even more strange. If what you said were true, your organization should not care at all what happens to the «Knight Killer». Yet you wish for us to save her. That's absolutely ridiculous as a contradiction."

Satsuko nodded honestly after Kirika finished.

"You are very right... Uh, the request just now is Satsuko's personal request. It has nothing to do with the Draconians. As a member of the organization, Satsuko is equally unconcerned."

"Muu? What do you mean by that?"

"For Satsuko, Nirushaaki-senpai is someone she knows and used to receive a lot of care from. So Satsuko wants to repay her kindness... At

least, Satsuko can't just watch her get attacked and killed by the Knights' Dominion. But Satsuko is a member of the Draconians and cannot openly assist Nirushaaki-senpai. So—"

"So, you wish to do it indirectly by using us?"

"Satsuko knows it's very selfish. But Satsuko has no other way. If Satsuko recovered to her original state, it is possible to use gaining combat experience as a reason to directly challenge the knights that are assaulting Nirushaaki-senpai. But currently it is very difficult. Umm, this time Satsuko will ask everyone... What did the Knights' Dominion tell you?"

Haruaki hesitated for an instant, but after all, they had already let slip that they had met the Knights' Dominion, so might as well—Hence, he told Satsuko what the other side wanted specifically. The situation between them and the Knights' Dominion. As well as the deal.

"So that's... what happened... Well, everyone... what do you plan on doing?"

Like in the past, Satsuko was looking up at them with innocent puppy eyes. But everyone already knew very clearly that she was no simple puppy—Rather, she was concealing sharp fangs in her mouth.

"This matter is still under consideration. Whether we ought to hand her over to the Knights' Dominion or not..."

"P-Please don't hand her over. Right now, she is no different from an ordinary human... Umm, if you agree to not hand her over, Satsuko will send a thank you gift!"

"This isn't something that we'll decided simply because of a thank you gift from you. Absolutely ridiculous—Let me ask you something. Have you seen what that Nirushaaki person looks like?"

"Because Nirushaaki-senpai adheres to absolute secrecy regarding her privacy, always wearing a mask to conceal her face... Satsuko is very sorry to say she doesn't know either. It's said that only the Commander has seen her face."

"Really? In that case, this doesn't change the situation at all..."

Kirika sighed with a troubled frown.

The conversation was thus interrupted. Only after a while did Haruaki turn towards Satsuko and spoke.

"To be honest... Even if you suddenly make this kind of request, we cannot reply: 'Really? Then we'll do that.' We must give it further thought. Rather, we plan on explaining to the superintendent tomorrow. You see, since he is the superintendent after all, perhaps he might have discovered someone suspicious among the new students already."

Perhaps they were just delaying the question but this was honestly what they thought. They did not intend to lower their guard and accept the week of breathing space, but there was no urgent need to immediately reach a conclusion—At least currently.

"So I'm sorry, give us more time first. Too much has happened all at once today, so our minds are in turmoil."

"Okay... Satsuko understands."

As though listening to them in deep thought, Satsuko nodded lightly and answered. It looked like she did not quite accept this, but she also knew that forcefully trying to convince them would not help, so she restrained herself.

"So, Satsuko and Fourt will leave for today... Thank you, everyone."

"We do not intend to let your request guide our actions after listening to you. Listen carefully, I still haven't forgotten what you two did to us. If you still intend to attack us, I won't let you off easily."

Satsuko had bowed her head and was about to leave. After hearing this, she looked back and smiled, saying:

"Unfortunately, Satsuko currently has no such plan... Right right, you guys defeated Kokoro-senpai. Satsuko is very happy to confirm again that Fear-san and the rest of you are very strong after all, but recalling that Satsuko has never defeated Kokoro-senpai ever, someone as weak as Satsuko obviously cannot defeat Fear-san and you guys, that feels so lonely. So right now, Satsuko won't fight you—But wait till Satsuko finishes training and gets stronger, please fight Satsuko again, Fear-san."

"No, like I said, I don't want to fight you again. Don't come back to challenge me!"

Fear added greater emphasis, but Satsuko did not heed her. She bowed her head again.

"Then we'll take our leave now. Although Satsuko cannot openly give support, once information is gathered on the Knights' Dominion, perhaps Satsuko might show up again to tell you... See you then!"

A pure battle maniac who did not listen to others—Once again reminding Haruaki's group that this aspect of hers had not changed at all, Satsuko disappeared into the streets at night with Fourteen stuck tightly on her back, refusing to separate.

After talking to them and walking for quite a while—

Satsuko felt that the companion, who had been tightly stuck to her back, suddenly stopped walking.

"Fourt, what's wrong?"

"Honestly, I'd like to declare that I really can't get motivated about this."

"What are you referring to?" Satsuko stopped where she was and asked without looking back.

"Regarding everything about this operation. All the issues are surfacing with perfect coincidence. The Knights' Dominion, Fear-in-Cube, the Battle Demon—as well as the «Nest Parasitoid» plan. I get the feeling that the higher-ups are demanding us to keep a low profile beyond necessary. I like simple things because they are easier to deal with. But this is definitely no simple matter."

"Even so, it is still necessary to follow orders."

"Of course, I understand. And I'll help too—I was simply grumbling just now. Don't mind me."

"Fufu... Although it's a bit weird for Satsuko to apologize, sorry. Satsuko will help you sweep and clean once we get back."

"Hmm. In that case, please clean that place inside there. It's been so long already... Please, thoroughly... Using some force is fine. No—Please do use force. Forcefully scrub it again and again, please."

Fourteen's voice was filled with anticipation and excitement that could not be concealed.

Satsuko finally turned around and said with a slightly wry smile:

"Yes yes, got it, got it, Fourt... Anyway, please don't use a lunchbox vendor's banner to cover your head while talking. The people in the shop have been staring at us all this time."

Part 3

"Although it's a bit late to point out now, this seems to be turning into a kind of habit."

"Hmmmmm~ Turning into a habit?"

"Yeah, and a bad habit at that."

"That's really terrible! You should tell the other party... So, who are you referring to?"

"IT. IS. YOU. OKAY!? You, dressed in uniform! This is school! You are not student!"

"What!? You seem to be reminding me with a weird Indian accent!"

After school the next day, Haruaki's group was gathered in the superintendent's office. Currently in the room were the five of them who had met Satsuko yesterday and naturally, the trio who were normally in the office in the first place. Due to Monday being the beauty parlor's fixed day off (but she also slacked off yesterday and did not open shop), Kuroe had put on the school uniform and invaded the superintendent's office as though it was a fortunate coincidence.

Everyone had gathered here to hold a strategy meeting to address the imminent crisis. Just now, they had already explained the gist of what had happened until yesterday to the superintendent and were now waiting for his response. Finally, the superintendent replied:

"Hmm~ ...I still have no clue regarding this Nirushaaki character. What about you, Zenon-kun?"

"I have never heard of her either. Naturally, this goes the same for Onee-sama as well."

"In that case, that person really must have joined the Draconians after we left. Regrettably, we have no information regarding her appearance or somesuch either."

"Yes, I figured. From that fact that you already contacted Chihaya and Isuzu, I can tell that you've at least confirmed whether there were suspicious characters among the new students, right?"

Konoha nodded and did not show any signs of disappointment. "Of course we confirmed." The superintendent nodded and concurred.

"Just as you all know, we are no longer involved with them. We also wish to avoid contact with the Draconians as much as possible. But the problem is that this Nirushaaki has apparently quit."

"Suppose she asks you for assistance, what would you do?"

Kirika asked gravely. The superintendent shrugged in an exaggerated manner.

"What a difficult question to answer. It's impossible to know until the time comes... From a senior's standpoint, I think it's very hard to ignore her. Oh of course, I mean as senior in terms of hating that organization."

At this moment, the superintendent puffed out his chest while sitting in his chair, sweeping his gaze across everyone.

"So anyway, I now understand the situation. Let me summarize. A former Draconian is current mixed in the new students of this school. Because the Knights' Dominion that is targeting her does not know her appearance, they asked you to find and hand her over. Otherwise, they will resort to violence, hurting each and every female student to determine whether or not they are Nirushaaki. On the other hand, a member of the Draconians also made a personal request to you, hoping you could help Nirushaaki. So, in the end... What should be done?"

Hmm~ Haruaki tilted his head. In the end, the question to ponder still returned to this issue, in other words, the strategy from this point onwards.

Nevertheless, at this moment, Fear suddenly raised her hand, having crossed her arms in deep thought until now. Like a teacher, the superintendent pointed at her and said:

"Please speak, Fear-kun."

"I've been thinking until now. In the end, there's no choice but to go through the process of elimination, right?"

"Process of elimination?"

"Yes. I've tried simulating it in my imagination already. I don't know what kind of person this «Knight Killer» is. However, putting that aside for now, no matter what kind of person this «Knight Killer» is, are we able to say 'Kill her, slice her, violate her, do whatever you want' and hand her over to the Knights' Dominion? But no matter how I try imagining it—The conclusion is no. Because I don't wanna. If she really deserted the Draconians and is trying to be an ordinary high school student, then whether that «Knight Killer» is like Satsuko or Kokoro, no matter what, the conclusion remains the same. Say... Am I the only one who feels this way? Those who feel this way, am I the only one?"

"No—The same goes for me. I think it's the same for everyone."

Haruaki narrowed his eyes and nodded. Indeed. Perhaps they were overthinking things. Perhaps they were too impatient in wanting to solve every problem at once. In actual fact, all they needed to do was start by drawing a line that they would never cross or compromise and work successively through the issues they understood, one by one. Handing over their minds to simple thinking like Fear's was enough.

Indeed, since they knew the Knights' Dominion will kill that person, no matter how they thought about it, there was no way they were still going to hand the target over. That would be tantamount to killing her by their own hands. That remained true even if that person were an enemy. And knowing that she was no longer an enemy and had abandoned battle, it was even more obvious.

"Very good. Then by the process of elimination, the final choice is this: Originally, it was a choice between two, but now only one is left. In other words, we won't hand the «Knight Killer» to the Knights' Dominion."

"But in that case, there is the possibility that students might be harmed."

"Hmph, contemptible Cow Tits, I knew you were going to say that. That's very simple too—We'll just have to defeat them before anyone gets hurt. They will surely reappear at the deadline after a week. We just need to defeat them definitively when the time comes."

"Easier said than done, Fear. But based on what they said, they seem to have more than two members. If they have other companions, how could it be that easy to—"

"Hmm~ Looks like a battle plan needs to be made."

"Well said, Kuroe. The way I see it, the best way to fight would be to ask that «Knight Killer»... in other words, Nirushaaki, to assist us."

"I agree. When settling the deal, the other side will be wary if they see that the «Knight Killer» isn't present. Conversely, with her there, they will probably lower their guard. So with her help, we should be able to attack while they're careless, or use her as bait to create more openings—Our options will increase. I believe this isn't an absolutely ridiculous strategy."

"According to what I've heard, that «Knight Killer» was ranked second? Hmm, frankly speaking, I do harbor some doubts regarding why someone who has climbed to such a high rank would suddenly quit—No, having occupied the same number two spot in the past, I have no right to say that. I should understand that even members of the «High Singles» might quit depending on circumstances. In other words, so long as there's no sequela like mine, we should expect her to retain combat strength as befitting a «High Single»... Despite giving up her power to fight, in order to defend her own tranquility, she probably has no choice but to consider stepping forward to battle."

"Ah, please brew some more tea," said the superintendent, raising his teacup high. "Okay okay~ I will go bring out everyone's portions as well~♪" Sovereignty answered leisurely while Zenon bowed seriously before walking to the adjacent room. Next, the group's discussion turned to deciding the direction of their concrete actions here on.

"Before we seek her assistance, it's possible that she might not have realized she's being targeted. In the end, we have to meet her first and have a discussion."

"Yeah. The problem is how to contact her."

"Muumuu, I've got it! Like this—Rush into the first-year classrooms and try yelling: 'Former Draconian, I've got something to tell you, hurry and come out!' How's that? Perhaps she might reveal herself unexpectedly!"

"How could someone who infiltrated the school to hide answer so readily!? Please think more seriously!"

"Thinking from her standpoint... She probably wishes to prevent other students from discovering her true identity. The issue we ought to consider is how to contact her. Hmm..."

Hence, Haruaki and friends' immediate target was to make contact with «Knight Killer» Nirushaaki.

Then continuing until sundown, the superintendent's office was filled with endless sounds of disputes. "No, don't do that!" "No, don't do that!"

In any case, the group's conclusion was to try out whatever they could think of first.

At school the next day, Haruaki's group lingered at the shoe lockers after changing into their indoor shoes. Next to the "Let us get all oiled up together!" poster at which Un Izoey was staring intently last week, a new note had been put up. That note was definitely not too conspicuous, but anyone who looked there would immediately notice it.

The notice board was basically a space that students could use freely and was quite chaotic as a result. You could find anything there. Clubs recruiting new members. Anyone want a puppy? A lost parrot notice. Nailed to a note reading "Lost and found?", what appeared to be a bicycle key. One also read "At 21:00 today, all guild members please gather at the plaza in front of the inn," probably the meeting time for some kind of online game. "The volunteer club is organizing a bazaar for the welcoming festival, seeking donations of unwanted articles." This ad reminded Haruaki of the welcoming festival this coming Sunday. What was going to happen ultimately on that day?

Due to the chaos on the notice board, the note did not seem particularly out of place. People were like going to interpret it as some kind of game and quickly move on after reading the words on the note.

"To the fellow kindred as former dragons. Warning: knights approaching. Hope to make contact. Signed Sekai."

The above was written in Zenon's meticulous handwriting. This was the first plan they had decided to try yesterday. Zenon had probably arrived at school early in the morning and put it up when no one was around. Naturally, Sekai referred to Sekaibashi Gabriel, the superintendent.

"Next it's time to wait. I hope she'll notice."

Fear murmured at the note then walked to her classroom.

Then everyone went to class as usual because excessive concern would not help at all and reckless actions could end up counterproductive by

rousing the other person's suspicions. But when they ran over to the superintendent's office during the lunch break to ask about the situation, Zenon and the superintendent only shook their heads. After going home and having dinner, Zenon also called to report at the appointed hour but did not announce any good news.

"Perhaps it just so happened that she didn't see the note today. To make it more conspicuous, let's try drawing a box along the paper's edges using a highlighter. Although it'll attract attention from ordinary students, at least it's better than getting overlooked all along." After they called to tell Kirika, that was her idea. Of course, Fear was immediately all fired up to follow on this adjustment to their plans, zealously stuffing all the pens she could find at home into her schoolbag.

The next day, Haruaki's group left the house early in order to complete this mission. There was actually no harm even if someone saw them, but if asked "What does that note mean?" Explaining it would be a bit troublesome.

"So, let's hurry to make it more visible! What color should I use? Wait, I suddenly thought of this, we could use the paper decorations used earlier for Christmas to put a ring around the edges—"

Fear did not continue. Haruaki and Konoha did not point out that she was going too far. Because there was no need. Even the need for adding conspicuous modifications had vanished as well.

Right there on the piece of paper with the words "Hope to make contact" written on it—

Someone had used the push pin on the corner of the note to pin a tiny note that had been folded twice into quarters.

Since the superintendent has not arrived at school early in the morning, the group held an emergency mini-conference at the superintendent's office during the break after first period. Waving the tiny note, the superintendent said:

"Hmm... How cold. 'I don't intend to make direct contact. Please show more self-restraint and avoid using this form of communications. Too careless. I will not respond again.' This means that she would normally ignore it, but felt that she needed to remind us because the method of communications was too conspicuous."

Those words seemed to be word processed and the note itself was ordinary copy paper. There was no handwriting or other clues.

Probably the more hope there was, the greater the disappointment. Fear stretched her arms forward and sprawled powerlessly on the table, sighing with the side of her dainty face pressed against the table surface.

"Hmm~ A response at last... What is the meaning of this? Why won't she contact us...?"

"Fear, don't be so disheartened. At least this tells us that the person called Nirushaaki really is among the students. Since neither the Knights' Dominion nor Satsuko know her appearance, the worst case scenario originally would be that they're both mistaken and Nirushaaki is not actually in this school."

"Yachi has a point, Fear-kun. In any case, the fact that she has responded counts as progress from our view."

"Really~? But she clearly said she won't respond to us anymore."

"Not necessarily. These words are very direct, but if interpreted in the most benevolent manner... I cannot guarantee for certain, but it might be possible to read it like this: 'Although direct contact is impossible, it's not like we can't have indirect contact. However, I won't respond again if you use this type of careless method of communications again.' ...Right?"

"Hey Cow Tits, are you saying that she'll respond if there's a better method?"

Fear suddenly got up from the table and straightened her body, apparently recovering some of her vitality.

"I mean that in consideration of possibilities, such an interpretation is not ruled out."

"A better method... I see, we just need to write something that is even more obfuscated. Like using a code!"

"It would be great if there existed a code that could only be used by people who knew about the existence of cursed tools... But unfortunately, even if it existed, only that absolutely ridiculous research organization would know. As a side note, the other side probably thinks that "using a notice board that anyone could read for a conversation" is in itself very careless."

Because it's possible to be seen by someone when pinning a reply like this and end up revealing her identity instantly."

"Muu, I got it! That's right, we just need to set up a security camera beforehand! We'll immediately know once we check to see which girl came to pin the reply! Can we still make it!?"

"We already said it's too late. Also, we can't reuse this method of notes on the notice board."

"That's true... Besides, even if we find out what she looks like using a security camera, we'll probably get ignored from then on. Using forceful measures will definitely displease her and make her unwilling to trust us."

Only after Haruaki said this without thinking did he realize that this was actually a crucial issue. In the first place, they wanted to meet her in hopes of enlisting her help to drive away the Knights' Dominion. Trying to deceive her and secretly find her true identity in spite of that would be completely putting the cart before the horse. What they needed to do most was win her trust while making contact with her.

(That said, we still don't know what we should do...)

During the discussion, break time neared its end. The breaks between periods were only ten minutes long. Finally, everyone decided to go back and think of a second proposal on their own, adjourning the meeting for now.

Part 4

Laurica "Trash" Shoegazer was heading to school today using her identity as Kagidou Himeno.

Of course, Laurica was not actually Kagidou Himeno. The real Kagidou Himeno was currently with her parents in a room of their newly built house, savoring the experience of being bound and gagged. However, Laurica was undoubtedly Kagidou Himeno.

Using one of the many Wathes in her possession—Professor Colin's Plastic Surgery Flowchart, «Rawhide FCD»—one of the many "trash" with numerous drawbacks but limited utility, Laurica had changed her face to look like Kagidou Himeno.

This was a cursed mask made from human skin, possessing the cursed ability to replicate a person's visage just by covering that person's face with the mask, converting the user's face to match. Its drawback was that the body remained unchanged apart from the face. Due to mostly receiving infiltration missions as an auxiliary, Laurica used this tool quite often. As a result, she had already lost her own face a long time ago. Part of this tool's curse was that repeated usage made it impossible to return to one's original face. After this mission, Laurica would have to live out her days with Kagidou Himeno's face until the next time she copied someone else's face.

Laurica was already used to it and had no objections to this face. Because she had chosen the target intentionally.

Indeed, there were reasons for taking Kagidou Himeno's face.

First of all, this was because Kagidou Himeno had left the combined middle and high school she had originally attended to enroll at Taishyuu High. In other words, she had no friends who knew what she used to be like. The fewer the people who knew the original person, the less the risk of being suspected being a substitute. While faces could be replicated by the contemptible Wathe, Laurica was able to emulate voices and habits perfectly, having undergone strict training, but prudence was paramount.

Another reason for choosing Kagidou Himeno was because she was very cute, judging from the eyes of an average person.

Strictly speaking, this was not an absolutely essential factor, but at least for maximizing chances, being cuter was better. Compared to not cute, being cuter was better. Even putting the mission aside, she believed so as a matter of fact. After all, she had to live with this face from now on.

Hence, Laurica used Kagidou Himeno's cute face to begin her school life.

Was school life boring? If someone asked that, Laurica would definitely answer no.

For her, school was a battlefield. There were many things needed to be done. Without being discovered, nor seeking anyone's understanding, she had to carry out the operation alone.

In other words, she had to live as Kagidou Himeno. This was her battle.

She did not need many male friends. But she must make a few of them to a natural extent.

As for friendships, she prioritized girls. Romance, beauty tips, celebrities—She continually collected the latest scoop on these subjects to use as conversation topics. Ignoring politics and economics was fine. The chances of these coming up in conversation were virtually nil.

The girls in this country had a tendency to interact in fixed circles. But for Laurica, one circle was not enough. She created many circles but without giving others an impression of slick sociability.

In other words, she must make the members of each circle feel that "this circle was Himeno's main circle." Her actions were all for this purpose. Depending on time and place, switching the circle she was making contact with—at the same time taking precautions to avoid being found out. She had received training to consider the effects of psychology as much as possible then use them to her advantage. It was not a difficult thing to control the hearts of the creature known as the "high school student" with many immature aspects to their minds. Skillfully using the various emotions of joy, anger, sadness and pleasure, she worked hard towards raising her sense of presence in each circle. When necessary, she resorted to shedding a few tears. Sometimes she secretly used violent behavior on the level of fist fights. It was also very effective.

Even having undergone all sorts of training, even possessing all sorts of Wathes—

Every day was not easy. Absolutely not easy—

"Sigh..."

"Oh my~? Himenon, you're sighing, right!? That's no good, happiness will escape—!"

"Oh sorry. Umm... I guess I'm a bit tired. My body always feels so exhausted."

"Always feels so exhausted... Ah! Could it be that you're being haunted by something bad!? But don't you worry! There are capable shrine maidens here to exorcise spirits! Hayahaya, it's your turn to enter the stage!"

"I don't know how to exorcise spirits! All I know are witching hour imprecations, but I haven't done them lately."

"...Haven't done them lately?"

"Uh... No no, that's nothing at all, I said something wrong! Anyway...
Himeno, if you feel unwell, just go home early. Where do you live?"

"So true so true, if that's the case, we'll send you home!"

Sitting near her were two girls, Hiwatari Yume and Hayakawa Chihaya. Himeno's relationship with these two could be considered relatively close, but compared to other circles, there was a slight tinge of indifference. Hayakawa Chihaya was a Wathe owner. Although Hiwatari Yume was an ordinary person, she was closest to Hayakawa Chihaya and also quite close to Fear-in-Cube's clique. Considering the risks, it was best not to get too close to these two girls. Had Hiwatari Yume not made conversation with her at the shoe lockers on the first day of school, she would probably have kept her distance from them all along.

"It's okay, I'm fine. Thank you, both of you! See you tomorrow!"

With a smile that did not belong to Laurica, but "one that Kagidou Himeno would make," she stood up, waved her dainty hand and left the classroom. Of course, when encountering girls from other circles, she would also smile pleasantly to say goodbye. After changing her shoes and exiting the main gate, she went home while watching out to see if she was being followed, reaching the house safely.

"I'm home~"

Rather than to inform the people in the house, she announced her return to avoid arousing suspicions in the neighbors. While closing the main door at the entrance, she exhaled. Only within this house could she return to being Laurica, although her face remained that of Kagidou Himeno's.

That said, she still had doubts whether this home was actually comforting.

"! ...Hoo... H-Haha... Ohoh...!"

Quiet moaning. She wanted very much to ignore them, but could not.

"Heehaw, you have returned, 'Trash'... Perfect timing, hey, c'mere..."

She was summoned. Laurica walked across the corridor and opened the door to that room.

This was Neto's bedroom, a simple room with only a double bed and a mini table. He was sitting at the foot of the bed.

Neto's upper torso was naked. Several trails of red-black substance were flowing across his black skin, carrying a rusty stench.

"O-Oh! SO. RAPING. BUTT. HOLES——!"

Neto was grinning from ear to ear while using a knife to stab himself in the shoulder, twisting the blade back and forth. Muscle and blood made gushing noises. Like a broken nodding toy, his head kept swinging.

"Heeheehahaha! Butthole, the best butthole! Yeah! Yeah! So much pain! Heehaha, heehaha, heeha~ Ha~ Ha~! SO. UNBEARABLY. PAINFUL—!"

Since this was happened all the time, Laurica knew without needing to look. He was having an erection.

"Another thrust, another thrust, continue thrusting! Thrust thrust pull pull... Then thrust thrust pull pull again! Oho~! No, stop it, don't be so violent, stop it, no, but don't stop~! Whatever! I thrust I thrust I pull I pull puranranran! I remember there's a song like this, right? Heehaha!"

Exhale. Suddenly, the knife stopped moving. Pulling out the bloody knife, Neto stabbed it into the mattress then picked up the only object that remained hanging on his naked upper body, the camera known as «The Paingrapher».

Then he photographed his shoulder. In the next second, the wounds produced from his self-mutilation vanished instantly without trace, turning into a photograph that was ejected from the camera, accompanied by quiet mechanical noises.

Laurica knew very well. This was the camera used by a serial killer who suffered from congenital insensitivity to pain. Wishing to know what pain was like, he abducted victims, subjected them to pain and recorded the process with his camera. Through inflicting abuse, through photography, the serial killer gradually learned the concept of "pain." To him, he was only able to feel "pain" through these photos. Subconsciously in his mind, these photos became "the concept of pain itself." Simply seeing, touching, experiencing them would directly cause the sensation of "pain"—

"O-Ooh... I went too far with my fun just now. Even if the pain disappears and the wounds heal, the lost blood still doesn't return... But with this, my ammunition is refilled."

Neto casually threw the photograph held between his fingers. The photo fluttered in the air before falling into the open guitar case by the bed side. Just as he said, that photo would be used as ammunition carrying "pain." Although one special trait of this W athe resulted in a multiplied effect when returning pain to the one who originally inflicted the injury, this trait was completely meaningless for wounds caused by Neto's self-mutilation. Nevertheless, it was still a highly effective weapon for causing damage to the target simply in terms of ignoring all armor and defensive abilities. After all, Wathes essentially possessed stronger bodies than humans (albeit to different extents) after obtaining their human forms.

"However, one bullet is totally not enough... Yes, really. It's no joking matter."

While muttering quietly, his mood suddenly went cold. It felt as though the temperature in the room had decreased all of a sudden. This change appeared whenever he recalled the «Knight Killer». His voice became as cold as ice while his eyes were like darkness itself.

"No amount of bullets will be enough for penetrating that bitch's butthole. I still need to resupply more... Not enough, still not enough. I'm gonna kill her, so I need more, more, more—"

Like for actual firearms, the more bullets the better. And of course, the gunman's physical condition needed to be in top shape. Stress must be vented instead of building up.

As means towards solving these issues, Laurica knew very well that Neto had two favorite methods. Simple and convenient at the same time.

The first was Neto himself. Self-mutilation, sublime and pleasurable. While being a masochist, Neto was also a sadist who felt aroused from the act of hurting his own body, in other words, utterly deviant and broken in a sexual sense. Hence, the second method was automatically decided.

Of course, it was Laurica, Neto's auxiliary. Worthless "Trash." Supposed to count her blessings simply because she was not discarded—at least Neto thought so—A thing.

While releasing the belt from his pants, he ordered:

"Undress and lie on the bed right now."

Laurica instantly answered and closed off her heart.

"Got it."

The usual act. She neither felt anything nor wanted to feel anything. Weight, pain, bedsheets, palms, mouth, tongue, blade, cold sensations, unpleasant rhythmic motion, photo sounds, pleasure, body temperature, moaning. Scolded. He was scolding her for being useless. A filthy woman. Butthole. The stench of contemptible Wathes is stuck to you. I'll wash it off for you using fresh blood. Yes, sorry, she answered. This would help end things as quickly as possible. All sorts of places were stabbed to produce all sorts of wounds. Then the pain vanished after all sorts of photos were taken, but did it truly vanish? So disgusting. Die. Feeling some part of her body cut open, her body went incontinent from the pain. He clicked his tongue, but the one cleaning up in the end would still be herself. Her consciousness began to drift away. Ahhh, soon, she was going to lose her senses like an object. Indeed, called "Trash," she was just an object. But—

But one day. One day—

After cooking dinner, Laurica ate together with Neto and Lilyhowell. Then it was free time. Of course, she was the last to take a bath. Walking into Kagidou Himeno's room, she tried to work hard. Doing something was better than nothing.

Pushups, situps, she also went through a round of other muscle training that she felt was useful while trying to avoid making noise as much as possible. Were Neto to find out, he would surely mock her for wasting her efforts then punish her for being too arrogant. Hence, Laurica did her usual homework secretly every day.

But as one would expect, the one she idolized turned out to be more observant and kind than Neto.

"Excuse me. So you are training here?"

"Oh...? Lilyhowell-sama...?"

Laurica stopped doing situps and sat up. Without her noticing, Lilyhowell had opened the door and was standing there. Perhaps still reading instruction manuals, she was wearing her reading glasses.

"Hearing quick breathing noises, I thought you might have gotten ill suddenly."

"N-No, I'm fine."

"Yes. Although you are an auxiliary, training the body is definitely not in vain. I am very impressed."

"Umm, I know I am overstepping my bounds in asking this of you, but could you not tell Neto-sama about this... Even if someone like me engaged in this kind of training, I think he will simply scold me for wasting my energy and consider me an eyesore."

Lilyhowell frowned in puzzlement and tilted her head as though she could not comprehend at all.

"Wasting energy? Effort is equal, no matter the person. However, yes, since you are concerned, I promise you I will not tell Neto. I swear upon my name as Lilyhowell Kilmister."

"Th-Thank you very much..."

Hearing her excessive promise, Laurica could not help but relax her face. She was thinking this was the end of the conversation, but Lilyhowell continued to stand there. Not only that, but she also closed the door and entered the room, then leaned her back against the wall.

"I would like to apologize to you regarding a certain matter."

"Eh... Lilyhowell-sama, you don't need to apologize to me. What are you talking about?"

"Regarding Neto. What just happened."

She heard it. Her idol heard it. Laurica's face turned flush red with shame.

"I know what kind of man he is and I understand how that behavior is necessary for battle. Even so, personally speaking, I dislike it. If possible, I would very much like to stop it, but you are Neto's official auxiliary. I have no authority to question the behavior between you two."

"Nothing of that sort! Umm... I am very happy just to hear this from you..."

Laurica spoke from the bottom of her heart. Her idol was worrying about her. Simply that was enough to make her heart race madly, her entire heart immersed in an atmosphere of bliss. However, her bliss did not end here.

"Has any unusual symptoms appeared on your body?"

"No, please don't worry. That's because «The Paingrapher» was already used to photograph all the injuries."

"No scars left behind? You are a girl so it would be best to take that area into consideration."

Lilyhowell approached without thinking and stared at Laurica's face up close. Laurica's heart was beating like a drum, the depths of her throat stiffening and convulsing. She smelled a great fragrance. The hand reached out and touched her cheek. That hand slid over her skin as though confirming if any scars were left behind. Her mouth moved automatically, asking:

"Umm... Lilyhowell-sama, don't you mind it... disgusting...?"

"Why? You are simply fulfilling your duties as much as possible. From an average person's perspective, this might be abnormal behavior but since you have decided to accommodate with determination, what is there to feel ashamed about? Looks like your face is fine. Where were you injured the most severely just now?"

Laurica's mind was a total blank. Hence, she very naturally answered where.

"I see. Allow me to confirm. Please let me know if it hurts."

(No way...!)

Lilyhowell's hand was stroking her breast, separated by the t-shirt, stroking the tip that Neto had sliced off then put back on again. Laurica was overjoyed, but she then heard something even more miraculous.

"Yes, I am simply surprised, but your bust has grown. Although it was only natural since you were a child in the beginning, your chest was so flat back then that I mistook you for a boy."

"...! Lilyhowell-sama... You still remember... what happened that time...?"

Laurica widened both eyes in surprise. Memories from the past dominated her mind. This was probably a common story. But to her, it was an absolute memory. A cursed sword. Unable to stop herself, she killed her beloved family. The stench of blood. Finally, the tip of the sword turned towards herself. By the time she realized, the blade was already shattered.

Standing before her eyes was a young, blonde maiden—Several years later, she was also standing right here, blinking in bafflement.

"...? Of course. I remembered the instant I first saw you. I simply could not find a chance to tell you until now."

No way... She... The idol and savior... Unbelievably, Lilyhowell still remembered her. And right now, Laurica could not believe that Lilyhowell was touching her body. This was even more miraculous than a miracle. Taken too much by surprise, Laurica became unable to think, simply feeling Lilyhowell's fingertips, finding them very gentle, very comfortable—

"Ah... Huff... Hwah..."

Lilyhowell raised an eyebrow and stopped her movements. Tilting her head, resting her chin on her hand, she cast her gaze towards the floor as though noticing something, pondering something.

"—Is that so? This turns out to be the case? Perhaps my longtime doubt is finally cleared up."

"Umm... Lilyhowell-sama... What are... you talking about...?"

"Laurica, you are the first person to hear this from me—"

Lilyhowell gazed back at Laurica seriously. She was so near and so direct that Laurica felt the depths of her body heating up. Then the following words took her completely by surprise.

"Actually, I am still a virgin."

"E-Eh?"

"As for why, it is because I have never felt any interest in having sexual relations with a man. I have never imagined it nor felt any sexual impulse. However, for some reason, when I am together with the same sex, or when changing clothes together, or entering public baths together, my body hurts inexplicably inside. Take this current instant for example. In other words, is it possible... Is it possible—I am only sexually aroused by members of the same gender?"

Lilyhowell sounded like an astronomer who finally realized the possibility of the earth turning instead of the sky, announcing in a completely serious manner. This seriousness was accompanied by surprise at a new

revelation, at the same time confused and at a loss for how she should handle it.

"Hmm, really? So I see. I have always known that people like this existed but never thought that I would turn out to be one of them. Now everything makes sense. I can understand now...!"

Laurica was utterly shocked. Due to being excessively shocked, her mind even gave rise to impolite thoughts.

This person had not realized her sexual orientation until now. Due to being too straitlaced, too cool, she ended up being quite out of touch in certain areas. Was she one of those so-called airheaded cool beauties?

In any case... In any case—

This was more miraculous than a miracle, surely a miracle beyond compare.

Her idol and herself. Although she could not turn into someone like her idol, at least, it was currently impossible to turn into someone like her. But at least it was possible to approach her. To let their bodies and minds overlap, to feel her breathing, to feel her presence at extremely close range.

If just this, surely she could still work harder.

Hence, Laurica lightly picked up Lilyhowell's wrist and brought her hand under the sweat drenched t-shirt, guiding her fingertips towards the protrusion she had been caressing until now.

Indeed, Laurica still hoped for her direct touch and confirmation that no wound had been left behind.



Part 5

Wednesday after school—

Fear was leaning against a tree trunk, rotating her Rubik's cube in utter boredom. The location was the front yard between the school gates and the entrance to the school building. Similarly, Haruaki, Konoha and Kirika were sitting on the lawn, watching the crowd of students getting off from class.

"Hmm... We seem to be running out of options soon..."

"Damn you, shameless brat, of course I know that. That's why I'm currently trying to think if there's a better way."

"Of course that's not a problem. But why here?"

"Sitting in the superintendent's office all the time, racking our brains isn't gonna help either. If we sit here and watch the students leaving school, perhaps we might suddenly notice something. Such as... That girl seems really observant... She must be a former Draconian! Something like that. So you guys hurry and keep your eyes wide open."

"Hoo... If only it was someone that easily picked out from sight."

After trying to contact the «Knight Killer», two days had passed, but just as Haruaki described, they were running out of options. Even putting up a more cryptic note on the notice board did not bring any response; or running over to wander outside the first-year classrooms, but naturally, only acquaintances came up to talk to them. In the end, they were still unable to find "a safe method that the «Knight Killer» would feel comfortable enough to actually contact them."

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, don't be impatient and relax slightly for a bit~? The deadline is Sunday, isn't it? It's only Wednesday so there is still plenty of time!"

Isuzu was also nearby, dressed as a shrine maiden, sweeping with a broom. As usual, she was serving as a janitor, fulfilling her duties. "Miss Shrine Maiden, bye bye~" A crowd of passing girls waved goodbye to Isuzu and she waved back lightly with a sweet and adorable smile. Since the students were completely unable to distinguish between them, they gave up from the start. The current popular trend was to address Isuzu and her sisters uniformly as "Miss Shine Maiden."

"You have a point, but the difference only lies in whether we interpret the time as half gone or half remaining."

Fear replied while staring at the flood of leaving students, meanwhile continuing to swivel the toy cube with clicking sounds.

The students' faces, faces, faces. Every face was filled with a sense of liberation due to it being the end of school. This was only natural, but even so, perhaps an illusion, somehow it felt as though the students' faces were more cheerful than usual, as though excitedly looking forward to something. They also resembled participants in a competition before a match, trying to do their best, perhaps because the once-a-year welcoming festival was coming next Sunday, dominated by club activities.

Was the target, whom Haruaki's group really wanted to hold a discussion with, currently looking forward to the grand event of the festival? Or was she thinking in depression, what a waste of a holiday? Who knows.

Isuzu was right, perhaps there was no need for urgent impatience. Nevertheless, Haruaki did not feel it was suitable to relax at this time. Was there no way to help the current situation make progress?

"A sighting! Fear-senpai, what's up? Why are you sitting here?"

Just at this moment, another student who was getting off school noticed them and ran over. It turned out it really was her habit, the girl used a vigorous salute to serve as a greeting. Probably because Haruaki's group was sitting down, she looked even taller and imposing than usual.

"It's you. Muu, still so big as always."

"Because I'm still eating that secret all-purpose food five times a week. Oh my~ I'm not gonna tell you what it is, Senpai. Please stay petite forever, Senpai, it's for the good of all humanity! So, what are you doing?"

"Hmm, this is what's called sunbathing."

"I see, how elegant! Ah—oh right oh right, Senpai, look at this!"

Yume smiled in halfhearted agreement then looking at Fear's hands, she made a look as though she suddenly remembered something, then started rummaging through her own schoolbag. What she took out next was—

"A Rubik's cube...?"

"That's right! Hmm... May I sit next to you, Senpai?"

Before Fear could answer, Yume already quickly sat down next to her, leaning back on the same tree trunk. "Ehe." Giving Fear a meaningless and silly grin, she then started to swivel the toy cube, making clicking sounds.

"After seeing you play with a Rubik's cube, Senpai, I was thinking of trying it out myself~ So I bought one~ Now we're the same! The fun is also doubled!"

"Uh, this is just something for killing boredom. I don't think the fun actually doubles..."

"Oh my, who cares! Anyway, I'm now at an age when I wanna do everything the same as Fear-senpai, no matter what! Mmmhmm~ Like sitting beside me, doing the same thing, Fear-senpai, you're still peerlessly cute in the entire world..."

"Utterly nonsensical."

In any case, Yume was not hindering her by doing this. With clicking sounds coming from elsewhere in addition to her own hands, Fear felt that it sounded a bit like singing rounds. It felt incredibly refreshing to some extent.

Hearing these noises, Fear suddenly thought of something. This girl was a first-year student. Nirushaaki was also a first-year. With no options at hand, it was necessary to change their thinking, anything at all. Was there something that fellow first-years might all know that Haruaki's group might overlook as upperclassmen?

"Yume, let me try asking you something... For example, I'm just giving an example, if you wanted to have a secret conversation with a certain first-year student, what would you do?"

"Can't I just talk to the person?"

Yume tilted her head in surprise. Fear had forgotten to mention the main point.

"But what if you don't know who the other person is?"

"I don't get your meaning."

Yume tilted her head the other way this time but she quickly straightened her back suddenly.

"Oh~ Could it be that... You're trying to confess to me indirectly?"

"Of course not! You're making even less sense than me!"

How were the circuits in her brain connected? Absolutely mind boggling.

For the next while, all Fear could hear where the clicking sounds of Rubik's cubes turning. Fear was puzzling how to explain the situation but Yume also seemed to be pondering some other stuff.

"A secret conversation... Anyway, you want to talk secretly with someone, right?"

"Yeah, but at the same time, preventing anyone else from knowing. If the fact that I am having a secret conversation with that person itself is hidden from others, that'd be even better."

"Oh... Okay, right."

Click. The sound of Rubik's cubes stopped abruptly.

"Recently, an information exchange website has become very popular among the first-years. It might work if you use the message board there."

Originally expecting nothing in particular while listening to Yume, Haruaki's group instantly looked at her in unison.

After asking Yume for the address, Haruaki's group connected to the website using their cellphones. Fear used this opportunity to ask Yume to teach her how to connect to the internet.

"Gah! I originally wanted to avoid telling you as much as possible, but now it can't be helped..."

"Ohoh! Even without a computer, I can still connect to this thing called the net! Damn shameless brat, why did you hide something so important from me!?"

"Of course it's because I'm afraid you'll surf the net too much, slapping me with an expensive bill!"

Inside the endless ocean of the internet, there were more than enough things to catch Fear's interest. It was definitely necessary to warn her later, but the important thing now was the website. Haruaki looked at his cellphone. This was apparently a message board website catering to cellphones exclusively. Signing up was not required. Anyone was allowed to participate anonymously in discussions just by entering an email address.

"Uh... So this 'Chii' person is the admin who started this website?"

Located concisely at the top of the page was information such as the name of the admin, an explanation saying that this was a place for Taishyuu High first-years to exchange information, and rules and expectations, such as forbidding libel and defamation. The text was finally concluded with a lively "Let's all interact happily together!"

"Just as written there, this is a place for exchanging information. Like what meal combos are recommended at the cafeteria, the current welcoming festival that's almost here, what clubs people wanna join, these kinds of posts are very popular. Even students who still haven't made friends in class to chat with can find lots of information here."

"If they don't have friends, how did they find out about this website?"

"Oh, because there was a note a while ago on the real-time notice board in front of the shoe lockers. Apparently put up by this mysterious admin known as 'Chii'... That's how the users increased and it became even more lively. Right now, there should be very few people who don't know about it, although I found out in the beginning."

"Oh... By the way, who told you?"

"It was Hayahaya. Oh my~ Back then, there wasn't a single soul on the website, I never expected the users to explode in number like now. This makes me so emotional..."

Haruaki's group secretly exchanged glances with one another.

"Chii huh... I think I have some idea who that is."

"Speaking of which, that person does seem to have quite the cellphone addiction..."

"Yeah, there are indeed many people whose personalities undergo drastic changes on the net. This is not an absolutely ridiculous phenomenon."

"Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two, the next time you see Number One, suddenly tell her seriously: 'Let's all interact happily together!' Something very interesting might happen."

"I don't quite understand why, but I got it~"

After speaking to Isuzu who was sweeping with a broom not far away, Fear looked down at her cellphone again.

"Since very few people are unaware of it, that girl might know this website too. But anyone can read this website, right? So in the end—"

"I wasn't able to help? What a shame..."

"No, don't worry. This isn't fruitless."

Kirika clapped her cellphone shut and signaled to Haruaki's group with her eyes.

"—We've done enough sunbathing too. Time to head home?"

Haruaki's group was not dense enough to miss what Kirika's eyes were saying. They decided to do as suggested.

"Muu~ So happy Rubik time with Fear-senpai is over too? But that can't be helped! Please find me next time so that we can spin the six colors madly together!"

Mixing up with the student crowd leaving the school, they went through the school gates. Yume seemed to heading opposite to their way home, so they soon parted with goodbyes.

"So, Kirika, some kind of good idea occurred to you?"

"Yeah, but I'm not doing it straight away. It's also more convenient to use the computer at home... Just check that website again tonight."

Of course, pay attention to mobile data costs as well—Kirika added in a joking tone of voice.

That night, a new post appeared on the message board that Yume had told them about. The title was "To the one who used to be a dragon." Just as Haruaki wondered if this was okay, he noticed a post titled "Dreaming of past life recently. Where is Chief Warrior Harikuheimu? Princess Shimani"

at the bottom, so it did not stand out in particular. As the number of users increased, the level of chaos probably rose accordingly.

They clicked on the thread that was probably posted by Kirika. The first post read: "No fear of being seen by others. Password is Haunted House Girl." This message included a new URL. The second post read: ">1 What is this? Please give more hints (*^_^*)" Probably an unrelated student.

Following the URL, they were linked to another website, a restricted message board requiring a password. Naturally, recognizing the haunted house girl, Haruaki's group entered "fourteen" as the password according to Kirika's hint. This was the password that Haruaki's group and the former Draconian, the «Knight Killer», would both know but no one else could guess.

On that message board, Kirika left a post saying: "The Knights' Dominion is targeting you. We wish to discuss countermeasures with you. Please leave a footprint if you visited here." Haruaki's group originally wanted to write something, but decided it would be bad if it ended up carelessly wrecking their chances. Fear and Konoha also discussed with Kuroe who had listened to the whole story and looked at the message boards, finally deciding not to respond for now.

They were simply waiting for the «Knight Killer»'s reply. There was nowhere more suited to a private discussion than here. Unrelated people were definitely not going to come. Other people were not going to know who tried visiting this place. Of course, the only drawback was that they could not know the appearance of the person who replied, but in any case, nothing could begin unless they started communicating with the other side.

Hence, just as the night sky grew darker and darker—

"It's here——!"

"Don't even think of coming over here——!"

The living room's sliding door was pulled open violently. "What's going on?" Just as Haruaki looked back, Konoha, who just happened to be heading to the washroom, closed the sliding door shut with a bang. Hence, all Haruaki saw for an instant was something silver and white behind the sliding door. It was probably a certain something that had just taken a bath, coming here with a head of wet hair and water still dripping off reddened skin.

"Hey Cow Tits, what are you doing!?"

"I'm asking you the same thing! Dry yourself and put on your clothes first!"

"Nuu, you have a point, but I wanted to tell you guys as soon as possible! Look, look! It's here!"

Behind the paper door that was tightly shut, Haruaki seemed to be seeing Fear waving her cellphone furiously like holding a trophy. Then of course, what she said next was:

"She responded on the message board!"

"I wish to understand the situation." A direct and brief sentence was the other party's first reply.

While giving Kirika a phone call to discuss, Fear and the others tried to engage in dialogue on the secret message board.

First of all, they reported the current situation with complete sincerity and authenticity. The arrival of the Knights' Dominion. Lilyhowell Kilmister. Neto the Avenger. Satsuko and Fourteen's visit to make a personal request of assistance. Of course, they also told her about the Knights' Dominion demanding them to "hand her over" and that they had no intention of doing that.

'In that case, why do you still want to talk to me?'

'We cannot stand aside idly and watch ordinary students get hurt either. Hence, we want to borrow your wisdom and inquire if there is a better solution.'

Kirika's response became the last post for that day. Starting off directly with "We want to use you as bait to defeat the Knights' Dominion" would be far too aggressive so this was all they could tell her for now.

"Hwah... There's really no response."

"After all, it's getting late so she might have fallen asleep. Let's continue talking to her tomorrow."

The group was gathered by the table in the living room, heads down as they looked at their respective cellphones. Treating someone's yawn as a signal, everyone closed their cellphone at the same time and dispersed,

getting ready to go to bed. After readying her stuff for school tomorrow, Fear also went to bed.

But no matter how long she waited, sleepiness did not arrive. Was this really okay? This doubt occupied her mind, unable to be dispelled. Hence, Fear covered her head with the blankets and flipped open her brand new cellphone.

What should I say? She felt that things had been too formal so far.

The current situation was tricky indeed and considering countermeasures was necessary. However, simply discussing this topic felt excessively boring to Fear. All they could do was contact the other person through this tiny device, unable to see the other side's face. Did the other side really exist? Fear felt very worried. At the same time, she worried if the other person was really pondering the response they had written. Could she find a solution to these worries?

Their final goal was cooperating with the «Knight Killer» to come up with a method to drive away the Knights' Dominion. What would this require? Definitely trust. They definitely needed the other side to trust them. Of course, they wanted to trust the other side too. However, in this current state where they could not see each other's face, knowing nothing about each other, Fear felt that talking about trust was completely far off and unreachable.

Kirika was deliberately vague about their final goal in the reply just now to avoid displeasing the other side and lowering trust. In order to avoid a negative impression. In that case, rather than simply avoiding negative impressions, it should be fine to try taking action to produce positive impressions. Putting aside whether it was possible or not.

What was the other person thinking? Feeling? Pondering about? Anything was fine, no matter how small, no matter how trivial or inane. Exchanging these sorts of insignificant thoughts would surely produce opportunities for making better impressions, easing the feeling of distance and unfamiliarity between them—

Fear connected to the secret message board. Kirika's response was still there. No reply.

While agonizing over the issue, Fear tried to create space for discussing other topics—In other words, discussion threads. On anything, it mattered not.

'Can't sleep. I might be able to sleep if I have a casual chat. If anyone's awake, please answer. I like eating rice crackers, what about everyone else?'

Fear tapped the refresh button periodically. Several minutes later, after dozens of presses on the button that she had lost count already, she widened her eyes in surprise.

'I can't sleep either. Our interests are aligned. I like hamburgers.'

A response. Fear suddenly thought, perhaps the person wanted to trust the unseen face on the other side, just like herself.

Also—Indeed. Why a response was made could very well be due to a simpler reason.

Fear was a female high schooler. So was the other person. Although neither of them were ordinary existences, at least they were both trying to become ordinary. Working hard to change from existences that used to hurt others to become purely lifeforms known as "ordinary high school girls." Perhaps the road to completion was still a long way away, but having worked hard so far, they probably should have acquired some of that lifeform's lifestyle traits.

Hiding under the covers in the middle of the night, secretly opening the cellphone, chatting about unimportant things with someone.

This situation could very well feel extremely like what "ordinary high school girls" did—

Since even Fear found this unexpectedly fun herself.

The chances that the other side agreed were absolutely not zero.

Without particular significance, simply typing whatever came to mind, they chatted about school and life.

'Which club do you wanna join?'

'I cannot say in detail, but I'd like to join a cultural club. Because I've been engaged in physical activity until now.'

'That's really not bad an idea.' Fear replied. People who were too used to fighting would end up doing something along the lines of kicking the volleyball.

'There's a mushroom meal that is served occasionally in the student cafeteria. A legendary menu cooked by the chef using ingredients he went out to gather personally. I've only eaten it once, but it's truly delicious enough that it feels like you're flying up to heaven. You absolutely must try it!'

'How interesting. What kind of mushroom was it?'

I dunno either, but the mushroom had spots and numbed the tongue, it also made me feel extremely happy and excited. Surely a rare mushroom—After this reply, it took a while for the other side to respond.

'I heard that Ishida who teaches Ancient Japanese is also serving as a homeroom teacher for the first-years as well. Based on my experience last year, Ishida doesn't care about the students at all. You can sleep all you want without any problems.'

'I cannot say if that person is my homeroom teacher or not, but supposing that were the case, I shall make effective use of this information.'

Oh well, even without intending to make effective use of his attitude, anyone would surely fall asleep in front of those sleep-inducing runes.

'So, next are the recommended items sold at the snack shop—'

'I see, I shall take a note of this. The chances of being sold out are—'

Words continued, written text continued, voices continued as well.

A conversation between an upperclassman and her junior on topics all over the place, persisting uninterrupted—

Haruaki woke up at the usual time. Rubbing his sleepy eyes, he flipped open his cellphone. He did not forget what concerned him the most just because he slept for a night. Opening the message board he had bookmarked, he tilted his head in puzzlement. The contents were quite different from when he went to bed.

Tapping away to scroll down, Haruaki kept reading the conversation in the new discussion thread while walking out of his room. Countless words in mutual dialogue. Apart from chatting, it was meaningless chatting. The final post was made at 5:30am, in other words, an hour earlier. It read "Beach crab mysterious sea. It's about time for Nelson"—Definitely the result of choosing incorrectly when presented with the system's kanji

suggestions.^[2] He could not help but imagine a scene involving Mr. Nelson the mysterious crab-catching expert. That straw hat really suits him.

On the veranda, Haruaki met Konoha who was tilting her head and operating her cellphone like him. After exchanging good morning greetings, they both changed their destinations and tiptoed over the a certain room, pushing the sliding door open lightly.

That girl was currently sleeping on top of her futon, snoring in deep sleep. The blanket that originally covered her head was lifted up completely. Her silver hair glittered under the rays of the morning sun.

The open cellphone was still held in one hand.

Haruaki silently made a wry smile. Someone poked him in the shoulder. Looking back, he found Konoha with same faint, wry smile, pointing at her own cellphone. Shown on the screen was not Fear's discussion thread but the one Kirika had posted, the thread where their original goal was written.

'We cannot stand aside idly and watch ordinary students get hurt either. Hence, we want to borrow your wisdom and inquire if there is a better solution.' Under Kirika's post, there was a reply that did not exist yesterday.

'—I wish to do my utmost to assist you. Allow me to think of other, better solutions. Give me some time.'

Looking at the time of the post, it was roughly an hour earlier as well.

In other words, several minutes after Fear had left her incoherent message.

Part 6

Thursday and Friday were mainly spent on waiting to see if the «Knight Killer» had come up with a good idea. If not, then in the end, they could only ask her to act as bait when confronting the Knights' Dominion or ask her to join their ranks in battle. As much as possible, Haruaki's group wanted to delay making this sort of request. Rather than hoping for her to suggest it herself—that would be far too underhanded—they carried faint hope that rather than such forceful means, perhaps the other side might really have a more appropriate solution.

During the time, they still engaged in conversations over the net, mainly conducted by Fear with her whom they still had yet to meet, carefully trying

their hardest to understand each other. Without conscious intent, they began talking about the past.

'Why did you quit the Draconians?'

'I got tired of fighting.'

'But you joined the Draconians in the first place to get strong, right?'

'Indeed. I always believed that strength was happiness.'

'Has your belief changed?'

'After seeing the young people of this country, it suddenly occurred to me that they smiled very happily despite being very weak, despite being incurably weak, yet they still smiled without being ashamed of that, looking very happy.'

'Do you wish to become like them?'

'Maybe.'

'The first time I saw them, I felt the same way. Because I saw them directly rather than through television, this feeling was even stronger.'

'Is that so? I can understand.'

The other side's wish was ultimately very simple.

What she wanted to keep by her side at all times was a cellphone for connecting to others, not a greatsword, a spear or a giant axe for severing the connections known as life.

What she wanted to walk along was the path to school where friends and non-friends converged, not a path of blood baths where only formidable enemies and even more formidable enemies walked.

What she wanted to hear were loving words coming from the heart, whispered in the ears of lovers whose qualities were only kindness and meekness, not words of mockery such as "Any last words?" said to a formidable foe on the verge of death.

What she wanted to get angry about were instances when wearing a new pair of loafers and encountering an puddle, too wide to cross, created by an unfortunate downpour of rain after school, not when anticipated

enemies turned out to be weaker than expected, sinking into puddles of blood after a quick shower of bloody raindrops.

Fear knew very clearly that these insignificant wishes were very worthy of respect.

She could understand as though they were her own.

Indeed without a doubt. The two of them were very alike. To the point that it was like they were actually the same person.

Just as she desired from the bottom of her heart, so did the other person desire from the bottom of her heart.

At the same time, indeed, there was a question without answer in the depths of the heart.

'Are there things that annoy you?'

'Yes. All sorts of people in this school. Boys, girls, homosexuals, people who like to sing, people who dislike dogs, people who can't sleep unless they're naked. This school is able to accept all of them. However—'

—Could someone who has killed before be accepted?

The other side asked rhetorically. Fear could not find any words to answer. Since the other side did not make any further response, in the end, it really turned into a rhetorical question.

Whether good or bad, Fear found the other person very similar to her.

Hence, an idea suddenly occurred to Fear during class. What if their positions were reversed?

Suppose she was at a loss how to deal with her sins, strength and past. Suppose she wanted to turn into an ordinary human immediately as much as possible. Suppose this could not be realized as it just so happened that she used her strength against pursuers from the past then found the fact of using that strength unbearable.

If that were the case, if that were the case—

On Friday night, Kirika came to the Yachi home at Fear's invitation. The plan seemed to be having dinner together while sitting down for a detailed discussion. Just as everyone was drinking hot tea after dinner—

"What!?"

Fear slammed the table and got up without warning.

"W-What happened?"

Fear was clutching her cellphone, glaring sharply at the screen. Haruaki also fished out his cellphone and opened the usual webpage, instantly gasping. Also present, Konoha, Kirika and Kuroe stared in shock as well.

The «Knight Killer» who had been in contact with them, Nirushaaki, had written a new post. This was in the thread that had been discussing how to oppose the Knights' Dominion.

'I have considered a lot—To prevent unrelated students from coming to harm, if there is no other solution, perhaps this is the only choice. In other words—'

Clearly, unmistakably, the post continued:

'I will leave this school in manner that even the Knights' Dominion can understand.'

What she meant was that she decided to give up.

Give up her desires, give up her wish to become an ordinary high school girl.

"Fool, this... this... Isn't this the same as defeat!? Isn't this equivalent to running with your tail between your legs after losing to them...!?"

Fear whispered. Kirika concurred powerlessly, "Well said, absolutely ridiculous..."

"But... She doesn't mean she'll do it immediately, right?"

"Yeah. She wrote down 'if there is no other solution.'"

"Other solution... huh? In the end, as reluctant as we are, it's about time to say it. In other words, we'll promise her we'll never hand her over, then ask her to act as bait during the transaction on Sunday."

Saying that, Haruaki felt quite twisted and unpleasant. He considered this a last resort.

But at this time, the gloomy Fear suddenly raised her hand high, just like last time in the superintendent's office.

"...Yes, Fear, please speak."

"Umuu, then I'll be blunt. This is my personal view or perhaps principle. Anyway, I'm definitely not forcing you guys but please understand that these are my true feelings."

Fear gulped as though organizing her thoughts and continued:

"Honestly, about this «Knight Killer» Nirushaaki... I believe it's best to stop getting involved with her."

"Eh?"

"No, I think I'm not being clear enough. Explained in greater detail, what I mean is this, it's best not to let her continue to get involved with us. In other words—handing her over to the Knights' Dominion goes without saying, but in my personal view, whether asking her to come out to act as bait or hoping for her to bolster our ranks to fight in an emergency... None of these should be done at all."

Fear closed her cellphone and cast her gaze down to the table. Then in a gentler tone of voice, she whispered:

"She... really seems to want to become an ordinary high school student. I've been thinking, is it really right to draw her out? Actually, the best solution is definitely to let things reach a conclusion without knowing her face or name. To let her remain a simple underclassman forever."

"I agree too. I also hope to avoid getting her caught up in this incident as much as possible. Even the plan proposed just now, if possible, I don't want to carry it out."

"If that's what everyone thinks, I have an alternative solution. Originally, the plan to use her as bait was simply in hopes that it would make things easier when trying to defeat ten-odd knights. Conversely—"

Konoha sighed greatly and interrupted Fear.

"In other words... If we are willing to push ourselves harder and face a tougher time, there is no particular need to insist on that proposal."

"Let me just add as Kuroe's weekly report on special deals! It's said that we have defeated an enemy who was known as the «Strongest», in other words, we are the strongest team!"

"After considering so much and going through different strategies, we end up deciding on force to settle the matter. Haha, although it's absolutely ridiculous, perhaps this is unexpectedly in line with our style."

Interrupted by a series of comments from Kuroe and the others, Fear kept blinking at everyone.

"Y-You guys are pitching in surprisingly readily... I was thinking it wouldn't be weird if you objected."

"Come on, how could we possibly object?"

"Why?"

"If you ask me why..."

After answering Fear on reflex, Haruaki took a while to think before getting the reason. Then he immediately understood. Although voicing it felt a little embarrassing, it was too late to play dumb and gloss over it.

"I believe I can understand your position. So, I've already decided to stand on your side forever. If you wish to help this person because her position is the same as yours, then I have no choice but to stand on her side as well. Otherwise, my decision to stand on your side would turn into a lie... Right?"

Only after actually saying it out did Haruaki find the meaning behind these words possibly a little difficult to understand. But it looked like it was at least successful in winning Fear's agreement.

"A-Although... I don't really understand... Hmm, whatever. Since we're all in agreement, I have no objections."

Konoha and Kirika were pouting sullenly for some reason, but it seemed to be unrelated to the main subject at hand. Haruaki deliberately ignored them and coughed lightly, saying:

"So, it's very well that we've decided not to involve her... But how should we reply to her post?"

After mutual discussion, they decided on a reply. Fear typed the post as their representative.

"Don't be rash. You don't need to do anything. We've come up with a great battle plan."

'—What is it?'

'Don't worry. We won't trouble you at all. Completely uninvolved, you don't need to know.'

Then Fear made a gentle smile while posting the last sentence.

'Simple underclassman, goodbye. As your senior, I give my blessings to you for a happy school life.'

Part 7

On Saturday, Haruaki's group went to school as usual. Since their classes only last half a day, the students on the way to school seemed especially happy and excited. But unlike usual, Sunday, tomorrow was not going to be a holiday but the welcoming festival instead. It was a festival for welcoming new students and could also be considered a festival for clubs to recruit new members.

Despite being one day before the event, a festival's atmosphere had already covered the entire school. An arch in vivid colors, under construction, was placed beside the school gates while students on the executive committee were swinging their hammers vigorously. In various corners of the front yard, frames for supporting tents had been placed in advance. They were probably set here for now to be assembled into stalls after classes.

"Hmm~ I find every festival to be great. I start feeling excited for no particular reason."

"We're not participating this time, so we just walk around casually. Compared to the cultural festival, we should be able to have more fun in leisure... But our main battlefield comes after the welcoming festival. Take care not to get too exhausted in having a good time."

The Knights' Dominion had selected Sunday night, in other words, after the welcoming festival. Since they had decided to engage the enemy in battle directly without any tricks, things were definitely not going to develop too smoothly—But they had already made their decision. Haruaki was prepared so all that was left was to follow through.

Currently engaged in preparations for the festival were not just the students making the arch. The front yard was packed with students. Some boys were painting armor made from cardboard boxes. Some people were using saws to cut wood. Next, Haruaki's group saw an especially large board erected in front of the school building. A closer look revealed it to be the urgently anticipated list of contestants for the school beauty pageant to be held for tomorrow's climax. Hanging on the board were dozens of name plates with the contestant's names with inexplicable advertising slogans added to each of them. "The tea ceremony club's ace! Watch the power of knees glimpsed during seiza sitting posture!" "The antelope residing in the track and field club! Join us in a crouching start!" Among them, some of the contestants had added school identification photos or photo booth pictures. A boy in a headband was standing in front of the board, grinning widely while recruiting students.

"Okay, the show is finally starting tomorrow! Until just before the contest starts, nominations are still accepted on the day of the event! Oh, hello there, you're very cute! Wanna enter?"

Written on his headband were the words "MissCon Executive Committee." What was scary was that this was apparently an official event on a premature start already.

"So that's the legendary school beauty pageant... How lively and full of vigor."

"Yes, after all, it's the finale event. It's also a chance for contestants to introduce their clubs, so many clubs should be sending representatives to participate."

"Are there prizes?"

"There should be gift cards for books and shopping. Although I forgot how much, seeing as this is a school event after all, the monetary values should be within sensible bounds. I remember that the nearby shopping street is also supposed to sponsor the school beauty pageant... The shopping street provides goods as prizes and in exchange, Miss Taishyuu High has to help with the shopping street's events for a whole year. Like serving as the MC for the Bon Festival party in summer."

"So that's what's known as give and take~ Say, I'm sure someone will use this chance to start a betting pool."

Noticing the surroundings, Haruaki suddenly whispered. Students could be seen all around, enthusiastically looking at the contestant list and writing in notebooks. Konoha nodded.

"Yes. Perhaps the executive committee might be discreetly acquiescing, hoping to make the scene more lively and exciting through the bets. Honestly, I believe this is the only advantage to announcing the contestant list before the event."

"Everyone is so full of spirit. With so many people entering, I can't guess at all who will win... To be frank, the way I see it, everyone is the same, or rather, everyone has a chance of winning."

At this point, Haruaki noticed Fear was staring intently at him. Her gaze seemed to be giving off worries, displeasure and some kind of doubt. But as soon as their eyes met, she hastily turned her face away. What was going on?

After weaving through the noisy bustle of the welcoming festival preparations, Haruaki's group headed for the school building's entrance. Just at this time, they spotted the familiar colors of red and white ahead. She was currently sweeping the ground but amidst this familiar scene, there was also something different from before.

Instead of the bamboo broom she normally used, this seemed to be a rather high-class western broom.

When they approached, Isuzu looked up while swinging the broom and greeted:

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, good morning everyone~ Isuzu received a letter~"

"A letter? From who?"

No idea—Isuzu tilted her head and presented the broom's shaft to Haruaki's group. Clipped on the metal component of the broom's tip, there was a letter addressed to "Yachi Haruaki-sama."

"Uh~ This morning, Isuzu went to the storeroom at the back of the school building where the cleaning equipment is kept~ There was a female student sweeping with this broom in front of the storeroom. She looked quite happy and I could almost hear her humming a song. I was thinking she was probably someone who loved sweeping a lot. But when Isuzu

greeted her, that female student suddenly acted awkward, blushing intensely then she stuffed this letter and broom to Isuzu together—"

Halfway through Isuzu's explanation, Haruaki realized. He believed that Fear and the others should have realized it too.

The broom in Isuzu's hand looked very familiar.

It was precisely something that attacked them as a weapon in the past.

—Upon seeing this letter, please come to the west side at the back of the school immediately—

Following the letter's instructions, Haruaki's group headed to the location indicated. They also took this chance to call Kirika who was already at school to meet up with her along the way.

Hence, they arrived behind the school. As expected, the person there was—

"...You finally started cosplaying?"

"That's so mean~! Satsuko knows that someone like Satsuko isn't suited to wearing this, but this is a disguise to avoid attracting too much attention. But it suits Fourt quite well, right?"

"E-Eeeee~ No no... D-Don't say things that'll attract attention to me..."

Before their eyes were two members of the Draconians, dressed in Taishyuu High's uniforms. The familiar-looking broom really was something that Fourteen had taken out from herself.

As usual, the pair gave off a very lighthearted atmosphere but Haruaki's group did not dare lower their guard. After exchanging glances with one another—

"Why did you come here, Satsuko? Class is starting soon. Be quick if you've got something to say."

Fear spoke with wary eyes while Satsuko frowned apologetically.

"Oh~ ...That's right. But sorry."

Satsuko then made a solemn expression immediately and declared clearly:

"But this is something that will force you to skip first period. Also, please listen carefully and let Satsuko finish."

"How dramatic the way you're putting it. What on earth is it?"

"To be honest, Satsuko still can't confirm this yet. But Satsuko hopes that everyone can listen with an open mind conceding that 'this might be the situation'... No, even so, if it really turned out to be true, the effects are too great, which is why Satsuko decided to report to you all."

"Your intro is so long-winded that it's absolutely ridiculous. Just say it out directly."

As the class representative, of course she was feeling anxious about skipping class after all. After being urged by Kirika in exasperation, Satsuko hunched her neck slightly and swept her gaze across everyone.

"So..."

The words she immediately followed with were—

"The actions of the Knights' Dominion so far might be all a ruse. The deal with you guys is completely irrelevant and they don't need to attract unnecessary attention or hurt every unrelated student—That's right. The Knights' Dominion might possess a method to find Nirushaaki-senpai on their own."

Chapter 3 - Spring Festival / Hence the Nonstop Cheering / "Hello, future"

Part 1

"What—What do you mean by that!?"

Fear's voice was trembling in shock. Satsuko's voice was very calm and sounded like she was simply reading out a report:

"It all began when news was received about a member of the auxiliaries obtaining a certain Wathe. That Wathe's official name and detailed powers are unknown but is rumored to possess a cursed ability similar to a 'victory contract.' By using that Wathe, they might be able to pick out Nirushaaki-senpai from among the students."

"'Victory contract' huh? What ability is that specifically?"

"Because Satsuko doesn't have the full details yet, this contains speculation—Anyway, it's a Wathe that allows one to know the losers' 'secrets' completely when the owner emerges victorious in a vote on some kind of conceptual domain. Probably meaning that it can read the losers' minds."

"A vote...?"

After hearing this word, Konoha frowned. This word also invaded Haruaki's mind. There was some kind of ominous premonition. It felt like the word was hanging around them somewhere.

Kirika clenched her fist and fired off a series of questions. Satsuko also answered her questions one by one.

"The definition of loser is?"

"Probably every human eligible to win."

"It's coercive? What a powerful ability."

"Which is why it requires the restrictive act of 'voting' as a medium. A very restrictive condition."

"What do you mean by conceptual domain?"

"Villages, cities, schools, organizations... In other words, a kind of public community. However, the Wathe's curse does have limits in power. It's said that a 'country' is too large in scope to take effect."

"Who obtained this Wathe?"

"It's «Neto the Avenger»'s auxiliary. The Draconians believe that the Dominion Lord was the one who issued the Wathe. Neto is a peculiar knight who deliberately suffers attacks from Wathe users then fights using the desire for vengeance arising from the pain. Because he is so peculiar, it's said that his auxiliary is equipped with many support abilities to facilitate handling peculiar situations. Examples include mind control, memory erasure and—

Satsuko took a deep breath and continued:

"Changing one's appearance, taking on another's identity completely to infiltrate certain locations."

Ominous imaginings were starting to be pieced together. Ominous premonitions were gradually taking on a distinct and coherent form. The kind of imagining that felt like this very well could be true.

"Hold on... In other words, this is what's going on? The Knights' Dominion was actually lying in asking us to hand her over in one week, so they don't really care—"

"Their true goal is to use that Wathe's cursed ability to locate Nirushaaki. Obtaining victory in a vote on a certain domain... Although it's absolutely ridiculous to explain in ordinary language by this point... Concretely, they have already sent someone in disguise to infiltrate the school, intending to emerge victorious in the school beauty pageant that's being held tomorrow!"

"Thinking back, during the flower viewing, the other side seemed to have encountered us by accident. If the deal they proposed was meant for buying time until the school beauty pageant... Everything makes sense."

"Satsuko will repeat, there's no concrete evidence. Satsuko just thinks that the possibility exists—But anyway, this is the situation."

"Even if you say it's just a possibility... If it turns out to be real, it'll be too late to do anything once it happens. We were planning to find a way to conclude the affair after defeating the Knights' Dominion tomorrow night

when they show up for the deal. But if the deal itself was simply a lie for buying time, they already have a real plan in progress and it succeeds—Then those guys aren't even going to visit our house. By that time, they would have dealt with the target already."

After Haruaki muttered quietly, Fear shook her silver head violently from side to side, adding more emphasis in her tone:

"I won't stand back and ignore this! I've already told her not to worry... We won't add to her troubles! I absolutely won't let them kill her—a girl who only wishes to become an ordinary high school student!"

"Yeah, but if it's true, the risk is too great. We have no choice but to assume it's true and take action."

"But before that, there is one more issue. Namely, how trustworthy is news coming from this person."

Konoha glanced towards Satsuko. Still trembling, Fourteen hid behind Satsuko. Satsuko smiled wryly while tilting her head.

"Satsuko can understand how you feel. It's only natural that you cannot believe words coming from someone like Satsuko... But at least, Satsuko can confirm that she really heard this information for real."

"Then let me ask you, where did the news come from?"

"These past few days, Satsuko and Fourt challenged another knight, using this as rehab and a chance to gather information. Even knights who are not part of this operation should know a little information, being in the same organization after all. This is information gathered by questioning that person!"

"In that case, the information you obtained is absolutely ridiculous in its incompleteness. If you sincerely wish to save your senior, you would have questioned more thoroughly."

Kirika narrowed her eyes and pressed on. Satsuko laughed "ehehe" and answered:

"You are right... But Satsuko could not help it. Because halfway through the questioning, that person died. Satsuko was thinking he shouldn't be that weak, but it was a slight oversight on Satsuko's part... Indeed, torture should be left to those who are used to it! Like Fear-san!"

"! —Shut up! Enough, shut your damn mouth. Don't say anymore!"

"Then that is what Satsuko will do for now. If you have any questions, feel free to ask~"

Fear gave Satsuko one final glare then ignored her and turned back towards Haruaki and the rest of the group.

"Assuming this information is true, then what should we do to smash their plans?"

"The first method is to destroy that Wathe carrying the cursed ability of the 'victory contract.' In other words, finding the disguised auxiliary who invaded this school and catching her."

"This method... Honestly, it'll be very hard. Although the targets are limited to girls hoping to win the title of Miss Taishyuu High, no matter what, it's too rushed with only one day remaining."

"But at least she'll be among the students who signed up, right?"

"True but there are dozens of contestants. Also, I remember that you can join at the last minute so it might be pointless to investigate the current contestants at this stage."

"If they replaced someone's identity, friends might notice something strange, right? Is there any way to approach the matter from this direction?"

"That's very hard as well, right? If we need to investigate one by one, there's not enough time. Besides, if the enemy is not skilled enough to avoid detection, she wouldn't infiltrate the school in the first place. There are also plenty of ways, like choosing girls who had few friends to begin with..."

Kirika stopped in mid sentence. A certain face surfaced in Haruaki's mind. Very few friends, hence low risk. A face capable of winning the title of Miss Taishyuu High. He thought of someone who greatly matched these requirements, but—

"No... No way at all."

"Yeah, it's not possible no matter what. Quality is more important than quantity. The way those two are intimately stuck to each other all the time, Sovereignty can't possibly not notice."

"Besides, let alone advantages, substituting someone who's close to us would only result in drawbacks. They probably picked a student that's completely unrelated. In the end, Konoha-kun is right. Things would be better if we realized a week earlier, but by this point, trying to narrow down and catch the infiltrator is definitely challenging."

"So, we just need another way. Going at the root, how about getting the MissCon cancelled?"

"I see, want to try asking the superintendent?"

"As I recall, the school beauty pageant—or more accurately, the welcoming festival—is organized by the student council and club activities union rather than the school administration. Even if the superintendent exercised authority, it might not have an effect. Also, the shopping street is sponsoring this event, so that's tricky as well. Besides, just as everyone can see, preparations are underway in full swing and the atmosphere is roused to unprecedented levels. Exercising authority under these circumstances, making a one-sided request for the event to be cancelled, who knows if the student council will listen or not... It goes without saying that they will ignore the school and forcibly hold the event anyway, but in the worst case, there might even be rioting."

"Guumu~ But clearly without the voting of the school beauty pageant, that cursed tool's ability would not be able to activate in the first place...! Damn it, then what other ways—"

At this moment, Haruaki noticed Konoha and Kirika exchanging glances secretly. It felt like they were confirming "what to do?" with each other on something that only they had noticed, a slightly awkward expression on their face.

But in the next instant, the group felt someone behind them and looked up in surprise. Standing before their eyes was—

"Oh my oh my, please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, is everyone skipping class here? That's not very appropriate~"

It was Isuzu. She was dressed as a shrine maiden as usual, smiling with tender gentleness, holding Fourteen's broom in her hand. Luckily not a teacher—Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief and said:

"Ah~ ...Hmm, this is the continuation of that letter. I hope you can turn a blind eye to our skipping class. So why are you here?"

"The janitor's job is to clean everywhere in the school~ Just now, Isuzu happened to hear voices and came for a look. Oh, thank you very much just now~ This broom is really good, it feels great~"

Smiling, Isuzu waved her hand. Hiding behind Satsuko, Fourteen kept trembling nonstop.

"Hiu... D-Don't look at me...! No more... No more, too embarrassing, I can't stand this, no more...!"

"Oh my, Isuzu isn't going to do anything, you know~ As fellow tools with cleaning properties, I feel a sense of camaraderie with you. Let's continue to train and hone ourselves together as we pursue the treacherous road of cleaning."

After saying these incomprehensible things, Isuzu suddenly stopped moving.

Then—Ring. They seemed to hear a bell ring. Isuzu frowned with extreme puzzlement.

"Oh dear... How should I say this, truly..."

Kirika narrowed her eyes slightly and asked:

"...Did you see something?"

"Yes. How should I say this? It's just an image flashing whoosh across my mind. It's basically everyone dressed up extremely adorably, standing on a stage somewhere—"

"Okay, stop, that's it. I basically understand."

Kirika sighed deeply. Konoha sighed in the same manner.

"I knew it. That's the only remaining method. Absolutely ridiculous."

"This cannot be helped. Yes, this cannot be helped..."

At this moment, Fear finally seemed to realize. She looked up forcefully.

"I know. Winning first place in a vote is the condition required to activate that cursed tool from the Knights' Dominion. Conversely, the ability can be stopped by preventing the enemy who infiltrated the school as a student from winning the top spot. In other words—"

Fear gulped hard then continued:

"As long as we enter the school beauty pageant and one of us wins, it's fine...!"

Haruaki comprehended. Indeed, this was perhaps the last remaining option. Perhaps it was the only action they could take for the sake of protecting "her" who wanted to become an ordinary high school student.

But there was one thing that Haruaki could not comprehend.

Namely, he could not understand why in the next instant, Fear, Konoha and Kirika suddenly exchanged glances as though restraining one another, then finally, with eyes that could not be more serious, they all stared at him intently.

Part 2

(I absolutely can't lose...!)

Fear's mind was occupied by these words, nothing else, swirling nonstop inside her skull.

It was currently English class during second period, but of course, Fear was not paying attention. She was already capable of reading, writing, listening and speaking fluently in English. Furthermore, the newly hired English teacher, Sagisaki-sensei, looked like a very timid glasses-wearing teacher and was probably not going to express disapproval regarding Fear's learning attitude. What if she did? Then Fear was going to make her regret being born in this world with glasses just like that infuriating Cow Tits.

Fear pondered, allowing the easily understood English pronunciations to pass through her mind without registering. She already knew the reason, of course. In order to prevent the auxiliary infiltrating the school from using that cursed tool, all they needed to do was have someone else win the contest.

One of their group. First place was called first place only because only one person could achieve it. However—

(That's right, I absolutely can't lose...!)

No matter who the opponents were. Of course, that included Cow Tits. Regrettably, Kirika was included as well.

In other words—She did not want to lose.

For what reason? Why? Who knows!? Fear muttered with displeasure in her mind. She had a feeling that she had been thinking about something during the flower viewing. When seeing Kirika take a grain of rice off Haruaki's face, she seemed to have pondered something. But this was definitely unrelated to that completely.

(No matter what, of course it's because getting first place feels great. Much better than second or third place.)

It's because of that! Fear decided on the reason. Indeed, rather than leaving it as fine for someone among her friends to take first place, she had to win first place. Without such determination, how could she possibly defeat the enemy? This was an operation where failure was absolutely forbidden.

There was no doubt concerning the legitimacy of her winning first place. Next, she had to consider her competitors.

Konoha. Fear had personally experienced a long time ago the formidable destructive power of that creature of hers that ought to be named the double meat beast. Based on the current situation, that gentle, polite, lovely and delicate appearance on first glance would confer a strong advantage, right?

Kirika. Rational and calm. Although inferior to Konoha's in size, her weapons were just right in size and shape. Kirika probably would not put them on public display, but sometimes there was greater allure in concealment by stimulating imagination. Having smart wits was also another of her weapons. What kind of battle plan was she going to come up with? Completely impossible to predict. Too scary.

Then there was the enemy, never seen before, infiltrating the school for the purpose of winning this school beauty pageant. The enemy's appearance was completely unknown but supposing that the operation was indeed underway as thought, surely she must be confident of victory. Surely she was certain of winning with a probability greater than half—

Surrounded by formidable foes. Fear decided she must think of a solution. Before she knew it, class was over, hence she left the noisy classroom and

casually paced about in the corridor to organize her thoughts. At this moment—

"Dear heavens! Although this is simply the washroom route, a chance encounter has filled it with an explosive aura of romance! Fear-senpai! If you don't mind, let's listen to the dripping sounds of streams together!"

Fear chanced upon the tall first-year student who was always full of energy. Fear's brain circuits instantly connected. This girl had called Fear very cute. Of course, I know I'm very cute but I've almost never announced the fact loudly with unabashed confidence. In other words, this girl is the expert who understood my cuteness best. In that case—

Fear tiptoed while she walked. Putting her hands on Yume's shoulders, she asked with incomparably serious eyes:

"You—Are you able to draw out even more of my charm?"

Yume's face was dominated by surprise for only an instant, but immediately, she answered vigorously with a salute and said: "Of course, captain!"

After classes on Saturday, or in other words, after school, Fear and Yume decided to use the chemistry classroom (it happened to be unlocked) as their strategy meeting room to bring their heads together, skipping lunch in the process.

"Due to some things happening, I've decided to enter the school beauty pageant. In order not to alarm the enemy... Correction, in order to produce more of an impact as a pleasant surprise, I still haven't signed up yet. I intend to leave it to the last minute tomorrow."

"Humuhumuhu~! Senpai, you're finally willing to get serious!? I will support you with everything I've got!"

"Just now, I already asked briefly about the rundown of the beauty pageant. They said that the contest will allot a bit of time for each contestant to freely display their charm. The quality of the performance will greatly affect voting results. What do you think I should do?"

"Well... If it's someone in a club, they will probably wear their club uniform and perform club activities, right? Such as crouching starts for track and field etc."

Sitting facing each other on a large table, they tilted their heads together. Then Yume suddenly looked up.

"Fear-senpai, please smile. Confirm confirm!"

"Hmm? I don't get it but like this?"

Fear tried curling the corners of her lips, resulting in Yume showing an ecstatic expression, resting her face on her hands.

"Ahhh... I knew it, so explosively cute that it's like you're not from this world! Oh my, this is already good enough! Everyone's heart will be stolen by you, sure win!"

"That's not gonna happen no matter how I think about it, think more seriously, okay... Eh?"

"Wow! What are you two doing here...?"

A boy was standing at the entrance of the chemistry classroom. He seemed vaguely familiar or maybe not. After asking, they found out he was a member of the chemistry club. The room was unlocked just now due to club activities. In order to verify Yume's claims, Fear smiled tenderly again and said:

"I'm sorry but we're currently having a meeting. Please lend this place to us for now. Don't disturb us. Why don't you go for lunch first?"

Even Fear felt that this command was very unreasonable but inexplicably, it worked. The male student nodded repeatedly and turned around.

"...Hmm, perhaps a smile really is enough. No no no, carelessness must be avoided, I still have to think up a performance to secure first place."

"Yeah~ The more weapons the better!"

It was thinking time again. Fear took out the Rubik's cube to play, swiveling it and making clicking sounds. Seeing that, Yume also took out a Rubik's cube from her schoolbag and started turning it as well after laughing "ehehe." The duet of clicking noises sounded like elegant echoes, resounding in the classroom that was filled with pungent chemical odors.

"Ah! I've got it, what about using this?"

"This?"

"The Rubik's cube! I've seen it before on television. Some people can solve all the faces rapidly to make the colors uniform. It should be okay even if you don't reach that level, but just by spending a couple minutes to solve every face, perhaps that's enough to advertise your wisdom and skilled hands, Fear-senpai, to further emphasize your cuteness!"

"Hmm, if I can manage that, this is a possibility. But I don't know how to solve it and there's not much time left till tomorrow."

"Maybe it'll turn out to be surprisingly easy after you try it yourself. I don't know the method either, so it's time to borrow the wisdom of others—The Search! Oh, got it!"

Yume handed the cellphone over. On the screen was displayed a webpage titled "Even a monkey can do it! How to solve a Rubik's cube!" The required task was divided into a number of steps with diagrams attached to explain.

"Looks like it's really quite a pain... But indeed, perhaps it's possible just by memorizing it and practicing to get accustomed. Okay—No matter what, it's better than doing nothing. I'll try it!"

"Great! But staring at a cellphone screen for a long time, it's too small and not very convenient, so let me write things down on a piece of paper. Wait for me, lemme find a pen and paper."

Yume searched her schoolbag to find stationery and a notebook. Fear watched her while feeling strongly how grateful she was to have a comrade like Yume. Clearly she only asked her out of the blue yet Yume was helping out so seriously. How fortunate. How fortunate it was to have a junior who loved and admired her so much.

But at this time, suddenly—A voice of doubt spoke out somewhere in her mind. After getting duped by the Knights' Dominion, her skepticism had grown sensitive. Was this purely good fortune?

The first-year student who happened to like her, appearing here by coincidence. Was this too much of a coincidence? Supposing it was not by chance, then what? What if she had lied to get close to Fear for some purpose. If someone like that was present in the school, then there were only two possibilities.

"Hey Yume, you're standing on my side, right?"

"Of course! Uh~ So, I'll write down the steps on this piece of paper right away~"

Fear held up one hand to stop Yume's movements. Yume looked up in puzzlement.

"In that case, I want to do something first before that. You may find it annoying and I actually don't wanna do this, but... In the end, after noticing it, I must confirm. So, Yume—"

With seriousness coming straight from her heart, Fear stared directly into Yume's eyes and said curtly:

"Strip."

Haruaki was wandering in school after classes were over. Although it was after school, since it was currently Saturday afternoon and the welcoming festival was tomorrow, there were still many students remaining in school. Kirika and Konoha had already gone home while Fear could not be contacted. Haruaki was currently searching for her after she rushed out of the classroom as soon as class was over.

(Clearly the cellphone should come in handy at a time like this, but she's not picking up calls or replying to texts.)

Essentially, school rules clearly dictated that cellphones must be switched off during class time. Haruaki had no idea if Fear had followed the school rules obediently, forgotten them, or simply never noticed in the first place.

If she had already gone home, it would be fine. Or if she was in school preparing for tomorrow, that would be fine too, but the thought of Fear currently doing who knows what at who knows where filled Haruaki with unease to some extent. At this moment, he heard from a classmate (even though they rarely conversed) some worthwhile news. The chemistry classroom had apparently been taken over at the moment. The male classmate belonged to the chemistry club.

"What on earth is that girl doing...?"

Whether going home first or returning together, she ought to inform him first. Haruaki made his way to the chemistry classroom.

Next, just as he reached out and was about to open the chemistry classroom's main door—

"Ah~ Ah~! Th-This is too embarrassing~..."

"Just bear it briefly. If you cooperate obediently, this will be over quickly."

"E-Even if you... say that, Senpai... I-I don't swing that way... I just love your cuteness platonically huwawawa! I'd rather you not examine that spot! Your breath... Your breath is touching it!"

"Next is this side. There, then—Oh right. If possible, I hope you'll open it yourself—"

Haruaki was frozen on the spot. What was going on? What exactly was going on inside this classroom?

"Next.. I will climb up there. Here I go."

"Climb up here~? No way, I somehow have this explosively intense premonition that Fear-senpai's weight will cause something to awaken!"

"S-Sniff... Hmm~? Inhale~... Exhale~..."

"Are you smelling me, Senpai!? What's awakening could very well turn out to be something very peculiar! Ahya~!"

What was going on inside was definitely not for eyes to witness. Absolutely no mistake about that.

But... Was it really okay to turn around and head home? Was it really okay to abandon Yume to her fate?

No, there were times when a man had no choice but to act. That was now. Definitely now!

Haruaki committed his resolve to do what he must do, meanwhile preparing himself for all sorts of disasters to befall him henceforth. Then with a feeling of courageous self-sacrifice, he transmitted his willpower to his stiff hand, mustering all his strength to open the classroom door.

"Th-That's enough! Fear!"

The scene inside the classroom pretty much matched what he predicted. It was also a prediction that he had hoped was wrong.

Yume was currently lying on a large table in the chemistry classroom. As much as Haruaki tried his best not to look, he still saw it accidentally—in contrast her usual image, standing tall and imposing, her skin was pale,

smooth and delicate, her cheeks were blushing red, her eyes were slightly tearful, and her breathing was rapid. The curves of her perfectly sized breasts, neither too large or too small, as well as the lines of her smooth and tender thighs were offering tantalizing glimpses—The only reason Haruaki did not see everything was due to Fear currently lying on top of her. Although Fear was in uniform, her skirt had hiked up so it was not appropriate to stare at her appearance either.



Fear had her dainty face near Yume's neck, sniffing hard repeatedly. Then she got up in a panic.

"Sh-Shameless brat? You really are too shameless! I'll curse you, I'll curse you to death! Get out!"

"Owah!?"

After delivering a flurry of violent blows, Fear proceeded to push Haruaki's back, shoving him out into the corridor. Behind him, he only heard Fear speaking towards the classroom:

"Okay, Yume, sorry about that! I've already finished confirming, you can put on your clothes now!"

"Huff... Huff... I might very well have seen a world I was not supposed to see..."

Next came the sound of the classroom door being shut. Now, Haruaki was finally able to look back at Fear.

"Confirm... What were you doing just now?"

"Because it bothered me. Then I'll give the conclusion directly. There's neither any weird tattoo on that girl's body nor any smell of a curse. I can't be a hundred percent certain on the latter... But if a tool with disguising abilities was used, I should be able to smell something, having sniffed so thoroughly already. So there shouldn't be a problem."

I see—Haruaki figured it out after hearing her explanation. Just now, Fear was simultaneously confirming two things at once. The presence of a Draconian tattoo somewhere on the body. The auxiliary from the Knights' Dominion who had infiltrated the school by using a cursed tool to disguise herself. Fear was confirming if Yume might be one of the two.

"As much as I don't want to suspect her... But this was just in case. I had no choice."

"Yeah, I understand now."

"You're able to understand? So next... Despite knowing from the noises that something that cannot be seen was going on in the classroom, you barged in directly without knocking. Could you explain to me why that happened?"

"As much as I don't want to suspect you... But this was also just in case. I had no choice either."

"Argh, unforgivable!"

"If the same excuse works for you, why can't it work for me!? You're being too unreasonable!"

Haruaki was not at fault. If he really were at fault, then both sides were at fault. He had deliberately quoted the same answer but the hidden message failed to reach her. For the next long while, Haruaki suffered repeated karate chops to the top of his head as punishment from Fear, exactly the kind of disaster for which he had braced himself in preparation earlier.

Part 3

The steam was causing Kirika to narrow her eyes while she brought the hot caffelatte to her lips. The taste of richly fragrant Italian concentrated coffee and the gentle sweetness of milk were perfectly blended together, sliding down her throat.

"Phew~" Kirika could not help but exhale a breath that sounded like a sigh.

It would not be an exaggeration to call her own apartment's living room the most relaxing place on earth for her. The gentle rays of the sun on Saturday afternoon were streaming in through the slightly ajar window, mixed with a gentle, playful breeze blowing at the strands of her hair, bringing a pleasant coolness. The chirping of unknown birds could be heard vaguely in the distance, serving as background music for this quiet afternoon.

(Ahhh...)

Kirika returned the steaming cup to the table then stopped spacing out towards the balcony and turned her gaze back into the room. An excessively quiet Saturday afternoon. Was having such a happy time really appropriate? Kirika smiled lightly then at the same time—

Her escape from reality reached a limit.

Slam! Kirika suddenly clutched her head and bumped her elbows against the table.

(W-W-W-What to do? What to do? What should I what should I do!? School beauty pageant? Absolutely ridiculous! What to do? But there's no choice but to go through with it. If all of us participate, the chances of winning will be higher indeed, so I can't back out now. But I'll need to do something while he's watching? No, this is precisely a rare opportunity for me to exhibit myself before him. But what should I do? Absolutely ridiculous. What to do what to do what to do...!?)

Kirika shook her head violently, twisting awkwardly in her seat, covering her face with her hands, kicking nonstop with her legs like a child. Sighing loudly, she giggled to herself for some reason and smacked her head against the table.

The vestiges of rationality, lingering in her mind, slowly allowed her brain to cool down and her thoughts gradually grew lucid.

It was better to do this, she wanted to do this, and she must do this—Hence, she will participate.

Ultimately, her decision was made a long time ago already.

Entering the school beauty pageant, winning first place. Before his eyes, defeating those girls who stood as formidable rivals. Miss Taishyuu High. Perhaps this could allow him to notice she was a "good woman." Ahhh, she understood very well. She knew that she was actually neither cute nor beautiful, but even so—

Having decided to enter, she must approach the battlefield by devoting all her strength. Refusing cowardice and underhandedness, she had no other path but this to walk.

(So... How should I fight...?)

Kirika pondered. What she needed to do before tomorrow. The plan. Presentation time. In front of all the students in the school. To be as cute and pretty as possible. Were there any hints? Kirika wondered about his past comments regarding clothing that suited her well. But due to «Gimestorante's Love», of course she could not wear anything too revealing. Him, him, him. When his heart raced in reaction to her, were other people going to feel the same about her?

Kirika suddenly got up from the table. She bit her lip and swallowed. Her face was stiff and pallid from tension and worry.

Even so, there was not a shred of hesitation in Kirika's face.

Having committed her resolve, she clenched her fist tightly while whispering:

"As reluctant as I am to use this... I have no choice but to move forward. I'll use that...!"

Konoha's twin braids swayed as she walked on the way home from school, rushing into the Dan-no-ura directly without changing out of her uniform. Soon after, a small hand reached out from inside the shop to post a notice on the front door, reading "Temporarily Closed for Today."

Several minutes later, in the living space on the second floor of the Dan-no-ura, roughly the size of six tatami mats—

"So in any case, this is the situation!"

"This is definitely no time to be working... Things have become unexpectedly interesting! Of course, Kono-san, I will gladly assist you! Oh my, I definitely can't ignore such a fun activity!"

After explaining to Kuroe the whole story, Konoha had enlisted her assistance. Supposing Fear had likewise visited to seek help, Kuroe would probably help her as well. But Konoha decided to put that aside for now. Getting bothered over it would not help anything.

"School beauty... School beauty huh... Kono-san, you possess such powerful weapons. The key is how to make use of them."

"I-Is that so? For no particular reason, I don't want to lose to anyone this time... No, naturally, it's because that Nirushaaki underclassman will be in great danger if we don't win first place. Apart from that, I have no other motives. So—Provided it's for winning, I am willing to accept any suggestion. Please feel free to speak your ideas."

Konoha was half buried under a kotatsu^[3] while speaking seriously. Losing was unacceptable. Losing this battle was absolutely unacceptable. Whether the outcome was heaven or hell—in other words, whether he was going to stop seeing her as family like an older sister, to start noticing her charm as a member of the opposite sex, or if she was going to be utterly defeated, deemed a loser in beauty as proven by the objective standards of the community? She absolutely did not want hell. Heaven would be best.

Especially right now, after that girl had started taking a stance to attack, she further refused to lose...!

Kuroe suddenly narrowed her eyes and asked:

"Are you intending to use that weapon?"

Konoha narrowed her eyes in turn and replied:

"If necessary."

"How far will you go?"

"Only as far as necessary."

"Your weapon is too powerful. I worry that it'll become overkill."

"Still better than not enough."

"I see." Kuroe nodded. Despite clearly not wearing glasses, she performed a glasses lifting motion.

"Since you have such powerful resolve, I will bring out everything I've got to help you win first place, Kono-san. Do know that my crash course is very harsh, forsooth!"

"...Forsooth?"

"Your answer?"

"Y-Yes, coach!"

Although in a state of confusion, Konoha still answered loudly and clearly with her back straight. Kuroe nodded with satisfaction.

"Oh, but I guess I'd better contact the laundry shopkeeper. After all, it's tomorrow and preparations might take some time. So, during this time, I will start with basic knowledge to train you well, Kono-san—"

Gufufu—Emitting bone-chilling, evil laughter, Kuroe made a phone call to someone while exuding a dangerous aura from all over her body. What result would be brought by Kuroe's heavy-handed assistance? No one could know. Was this really okay? A voice whispered somewhere in Konoha's mind.

Perhaps this is too impetuous—But Konoha disagreed.

At most, maybe just a little.

Part 4

A day passed within the blink of an eye. Sunday officially arrived. It was the day of the welcoming festival.

Last night, Fear had stayed cooped up in her room apart from having dinner and taking a bath. Finally returning home in the morning, Konoha had apparently spent the entire night with Kuroe at the Dan-no-ura. Hence, Haruaki did not quite know what the two of them had been doing. Only on the way to school—Fear was the same as usual while Konoha was carrying a large bag of something on her back—Haruaki could see exhaustion, nervousness and some sense of accomplishment. The two of them looked like they probably had some degree of confidence in victory.

Along the way to school, they met Kirika. Her expression was very similar to Fear and Konoha's but with some additional feelings that they lacked. Resignation and enlightenment. Haruaki could not tell if she was confident of victory.

Although it was Sunday, the welcoming festival was considered an official school event, hence attendance was still taken during morning homeroom. But after that, it was free time. In other words, they were free to do whatever they wanted until the school beauty pageant in the afternoon. Once the beauty pageant ended, the welcoming festival would come to a close and the students were going to disperse. In other words, only the school beauty pageant at the end was compulsory for all students as part of the finale event.

"...Let's have a look around? But if any of you want to do any last minute tuning, it's fine too."

"Struggling would be futile at this point. I'm also curious about what activities are held during the welcoming festival, so let's go."

Konoha and Kirika also expressed agreement. Hence, Haruaki's group began to stroll through the festival. Stalls were lined up in the courtyard and front yard, giving off the aroma of flour and grilled meat. Naturally, these things served as the materials to heal Fear's fatigue while at the same time serving to lighten the weight of Haruaki's wallet. But just as Fear was blissfully eating a skewer of grilled chicken while walking, she suddenly spotted the swimming club's crepe stand ahead. This resulted in

a group of girls dressed in spotted aprons rapidly approaching and saying: "She's appeared! The savior to bring in new club members! You must be willing to help us again!" Fear frantically fled, so the overall change in fatigue level might have summed up to zero in the end.

Inside the school building, the classrooms were assigned and lent to clubs and other groups who had applied for them. The judo club's ground skills massage, the tennis club's cafe, the track and field club's haunted house... Although they had nothing to do with regular club activities, at least they served to promote the clubs' names among the first-year students' awareness. In contrast, the cultural-oriented clubs were all holding exhibitions or making a display of their everyday results, trying to make themselves appealing in a more modest manner.

Activities were being held by sports clubs in the sports ground and the gym throughout the schedule. The kendo club's red-white competition, the cheerleading club's glamorous cheerleading performance, and in contrast, the cheering club's cheering performance that was dominated by the smell of sweat. The volleyball club was holding a challenge where participants had to use a serve to strike an empty can at the corner of the court. Meanwhile, there were also projects where visiting first-year students could participate and win food coupons as presents after reaching a certain number of points. There was no lack of variety.

The school was filled with hustle and bustle. Students were shouting to publicize their clubs' appeal and welcome new members. Others were walking around with their heads held high, dressed in club uniforms, totally unrelated mascot costumes, or sandwiched between advertising panels.

Watching this chaotic scenery from afar, Fear suddenly stopped walking and murmured:

"That girl—she's probably somewhere in there too."

Without any thinking required, Haruaki's group knew whom Fear was referring to. A certain person wishing to become an ordinary high school student. A certain person they had yet to meet so far. A certain someone they wanted to protect.

Konoha and Kirika smiled gently.

"Yes. Right now, she is probably touring around with friends."

"Perhaps frantically refusing the forceful invitations of various clubs."

"Fufu. But one thing I can be certain is—"

Fear opened her brand new cellphone to check the time.

"Maybe there's no way for us to see her, but she can surely see us. Hey—I didn't even realize it's noon already, time for lunch."

The bell rang and the public announcement system reminded all students to gather with their valuables. This announcement was like a warning bell since there was still a long period of preparation time before the actual start of the event. The students did not make haste particularly, either extinguishing the fires at cooking stalls or changing their clothing before heading over to the gym in twos and threes.

The students sat down side by side as though in a full school assembly. The gym was extremely densely packed.

Haruaki turned his head quietly. A member of the executive committee was moving the large notice board seen yesterday to the side of the stage. Three girls were walking towards the executive committee member: one with silver hair, one with braids and glasses, and the last one had a ponytail. Puffing her chest out arrogantly, Fear declared something on the trio's behalf. The executive committee member nodded profusely after making a surprised look, then directed his teammates to create name plates for the new contestants—

Haruaki proceeded to hear nearby students whispering to one another.

"Those three are entering too!? So surprising...! Should I tell the betting pool to update?"

"Say, who should I pick? Those three are all champion class. But I guess I'll vote for Cubrick-san. She's really so cute. Petite, pale white skin and lovely glittering hair."

"I come from a certain planet. Don't ask me which one, it's totally obvious!"

"...I really want to enjoy a class rep's scolding. Can you guys understand this noble wish of mine...?"

Listening to the conversations of unfamiliar students, Haruaki felt strangely uncomfortable. He watched Fear, Konoha and Kirika head over to the side of the stage under the executive committee member's instructions. Just at this moment—

"Do you get it now? In others' eyes, Haru, the girls around you enjoy substantial popularity. I think you should feel more grateful about that. Of course, that includes me as well."

Haruaki turned his head. One could almost hear a creaking sound. This was neither imagination nor hallucination. He forcefully suppressed the urge to scream.

"Hey Kuroe, this has really become your bad habit...!"

"Of course I have to visit if there's a festival. Also as Kono-san's strategist, I must see the results!"

Unlike the cultural festival, the welcoming festival was not opened to the public, but having said that, Kuroe could not be stopped either. At least I hope the teachers don't find out... Just as Haruaki thought that, Kuroe suddenly pulled his hand forcefully and walked. Along the way, they met the familiar Taizou and Kuroe said to him in a lively tone of voice: "Haru is going to help out. "Please let them know when they're doing roll call~" Taizou showed a face of shock for an instant after seeing Kuroe, but only in times like these was he quick on the uptake, making a thumbs up gesture.

"H-Help out? But the beauty pageant is all girls, right? There's nothing I can help out with..."

"Kono-san has already told me the contest rules. Some of the clubs have relatively low numbers even after including boys and girls, so boys are also allowed to help~ But of course, the changing room is a separate matter."

Pulling Haruaki, Kuroe approached the stage step by step. In order to surround the stage's side entrance, a fairly wide space had been created using partitioning screens. Kuroe did not stop walking and invaded the space directly.

"Hello everyone~"

"Nwoh! Kuroe! And... the shameless brat... What are you doing here!?"

"I'm here to help Kono-san while Haru apparently wants a spot in the special seating area to have a good look at everyone, all beautifully dressed up~"

"Uh, not really, I'm actually fine with sitting anywhere, she's the one who dragged me here..."

Saying that, Haruaki took a discreet glance around his surroundings. Just as Kuroe said, he quickly spotted signs of other male students to his instant relief. Probably the president of something like the geographical science club, a male student was zealously instructing the acting skills of a girl who was carrying a globe under her arm. There were several foldable chairs and long tables at the scene. If anything, this could be considered a secondary standby area where boys were allowed to enter. The main standby area, where girls changed and boys were forbidden, was located on the side of the stage that could only be reached by passing through here first.

"Special seating area huh... After all, it's a rare chance and I feel like both wanting and not wanting him to watch from close range..."

"Agreed. No, but this is only a trivial matter in the grand scheme of things. Don't think and discard all hesitation...!"

Konoha and Kirika looked especially strange. In comparison, Fear seemed the same as usual.

"Hmm, after all, the population density is very high outside, they're packed like sardines. It's not like I can't understand the wish to seek refuge here. Besides, there are others who already came here first for shelter."

Fear's gaze swirled in a circle then turned to the side.

"Why must I get all sweaty for the sake of such an inane activity? I am simply exercising a natural privilege that goes without saying. Come, Sovereignty."

"Uh... Do your best, everyone! Although I can't do anything, I'll cheer for you all!"

"Hear that? Seriously, her cheering is so wonderful that it would be a shame to waste on you people. This child's cheering will assist you more perfectly than anything else. In other words, I am the assistant's assistant who is helping her. I believe that my presence here is far more legitimate than the depraved voyeuristic human over there. You probably came here only because you derive arousal from the mere act of approaching the girls' changing area. May I trouble you to instantly switch places with the volleyballs hanging on the roof over there, to be forgotten until transformed into a dessicated human by the sun, human?"

Shiraho was sitting at a table, resting her jaw against her hand in boredom. On the other hand, Sovereignty was dressed as a maid as usual. To be honest, these two's presence was totally irrelevant. Furthermore, they were not the only two who responded to Fear's question.

"Uh~ That's right, this is what's going on. Like Shiraho-san, I'm the assistant to her role as assistant. And this girl here is... The bonus accessory that comes with the assistant's assistant...?"

"I am truly here only for assisting Fear-senpai! As her strategist, I am the assistant who'll help bring out her explosively peerless talents! Of course, I believe that Fear-senpai will win for sure and I'll put all my effort into cheering for you!"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, calling me an accessory is so mean~ Isuzu will cheer for everyone as well~"

Present were also Chihaya, Yume and the shrine maiden Isuzu. Haruaki had already heard about Yume becoming Fear's strategist, but Chihaya's reason for being here... Presumably seeking refuge, of the slacking off variety. Haruaki strongly suspected her delinquent senior as a source of bad influence. As a janitor, it was also very strange for Isuzu to be here. When her gaze met with Haruaki's, she even smiled profoundly at him. This was very mysterious too.

At this time, the bell rang in the gym again to signal the time for roll call.

"Okay, it's almost time to begin—an open battle for victory, fair and square! Same for you, Himenor! Don't look for excuses and say that people nominated you against your will. Now that you've entered, you have to aim for the top spot!"

"Ah, sure... Can't be helped, I will do my best. I won't lose to your Fear-senpai, Yumecchi!"

Yume was currently talking to a first-year girl, apparently acquainted with each other. Since the school beauty contest was basically used by clubs intending to recruit new members, most of the participants were upperclassmen although first-years were not barred from entering either. Probably like what Yume mentioned, that girl only entered at the urging of her friends. Naturally, the girl possessed a cute face that made it perfectly understandable why her classmates would urge her to participate. Perhaps entering under similar conditions, there were a number of first-year girls as well.

"Yume is right... It's about to begin."

Fear murmured while looking around the standby area. Her expression was fully serious. No, calling it serious was not enough. She was glaring offensively at everyone around her as though her enemies were standing right before her eyes.

"If the news brought by those two Draconians is true, the enemy infiltrating the school is right here, but it's still unknown how she intends to secure victory."

"The deadline for signing up... extends all the way to the end of the contestants' personal performances, until the speech time begins. So it's still possible to enter although it would be excessively conspicuous. Hence, it's more likely that the enemy is already among these people here."

Kirika and Konoha were also whispering quietly. Just as Kirika pointed out, the MissCon rundown first gave each contestant a time for a personal performance to exhibit their appeal, then once everyone was done, all the contestants went on stage together then gave speeches in turn to express a few remarks. Kuroe began to murmur discreetly in Haruaki's ear.

"Haru, the enemy probably won't slip up, but this is our job. Observe very carefully and don't miss anything suspicious."

"Got it." Haruaki nodded nervously. What he was able to do—Kuroe was right, that would be to find the enemy that was (possibly) hidden in this group of girls.

Furthermore—He had to watch Fear and the girls battle to the very end.

In any case, he must not turn his gaze away.

Whether this was unbelievably easy or harder than one could imagine, that remained to be seen.

Part 5

"Ah, sure... Can't be helped, I will do my best. I won't lose to your Fear-senpai, Yumecchi!"

Kagidou Himeno—Laurica "Trash" Shoegazer delivered her line with perfect acting skills. However, perfection was only limited to the surface. Her mind was currently filled with a chaotic vortex of thoughts.

Can't be helped? No, this was her mission. The path for her to approach that person.

Won't lose? No, she must win. Otherwise, «Battle Demon» Nirushaaki could not be drawn out. Otherwise, the Wathe handed to her by the Dominion Lord for this mission—«Râmnicešč Village Rulebook»—could not activate.

This Wathe was the old and worn book currently kept in her schoolbag. She had heard of its origins. A certain village chief in Eastern Europe had suspected his wife of infidelity. As his suspicions ate at him repeatedly, he finally went mad. Clearly he was the village chief, clearly the greatest person in the village, so why did his wife betray him? Who was it? During this time, his term concluded and the election for the next term began. Superficially, he played the part of an outstanding village chief, maintaining a harmonious family, and was hence re-elected. Then having gone mad, he decided to write, in fresh blood on the covenant where the village rules were recorded, the words "the winner of the election has the right to know all the villagers' secrets." Thus after his re-election, he began tracing all of his wife's movements and investigated the secrets of everyone who came into contact with her. After finding all the villagers' secrets, he reached an inevitable conclusion regarding what course of action he ought to take.

Those who had touched his wife, those who had spoken to his wife, those who had made eye contact with his wife, those who had breathed the same air as his wife—In order to prevent them from contacting his wife ever again, he sentenced them all to the punishment of blood and burial.

As a result, this set of village rules was cursed. Although the Knights' Dominion destroyed Wathes as their main goal, temporary reprieve was sometimes granted to Wathes with unique properties like this one. Another reason why this Wathe was kept instead of destroyed was due to the peculiarity of its cursed ability and activation conditions. The user who obtained victory in a vote within a certain domain would be able to learn the losers' secrets.

The user was Laurica. The vote was this school beauty pageant. Once she won, in that very instant, all the secrets of the losers—every girl who was eligible to participate—were supposed to flow into her mind. Among them, surely the word "Draconian" must appear. Someone surely possessed this secret.

(I... am only standing here in order to win...!)

She had made full preparations beforehand to guide things towards this end result.

She had searched for a candidate like Kagidou Himeno who not only possessed a high level of beauty but also social relationships that would not arouse suspicions even after Laurica used «Rawhide FCD» to become her. After investigating Kagidou Himeno's voice, manner of speaking, personality, interests and detailed habits, Laurica memorized all of it and copied them exactly.

Then using Kagidou Himeno's identity, she improved her standing among first-year students whom she could make contact with in a natural manner. Due to the apparent scarcity of first-years entering the school beauty pageant, to avoid attracting too much attention, she also manipulated social relationships indirectly to make a few first-years participate and serve as distractions.

In the end, she surmised that one of the reasons why she was selected specially for this mission was due to the "trash" she possessed—this particular Wathe bearing both advantages and drawbacks. In that sense, she was very fortunate. For the sake of her future, she decided to grit her teeth and endure, because there was finally value in owning this one Wathe, rotten, evil and disgusting.

This Wathe was neither the tranquilizing needle «Swine-Hugging Love» that only worked on animals apart from humans, nor the «Gruppen Healing Cloth» that could heal incised wounds by causing fractures somewhere on the body in exchange, nor the «Fork of Epicure» that made all kinds of bizarre meat taste delicious whether it was human flesh or rotting meat regardless, but conversely made all other food tasteless, nor «Bartolomey Oblivion» that could erase memories from thirty minutes ago at most. Rather, it was Countess Gritze's specially prepared aphrodisiac, the «Perfume of Mating Season».

This was a perfume that was able to raise affection levels in the opposite sex. Laurica had used it a number of times before to complete missions requiring seduction. The problem was that the perfume was consumed every time, thus resulting in a limit on the number of uses. Due to the vastness of the gym space, affecting everyone with the perfume would probably require using all of the perfume. However, once this mission succeeded, she should be able to open up the path towards becoming a proper knight, so Laurica believed it was worth the costs.

By using that perfume, which would be diluted to some extent due to the vast space, virtually all the male students present should be charmed enough to write down her name on the ballot paper. In conjunction with the social relationships she had cultivated in a down-to-earth manner, the majority of first-year girls would also vote for her.

After such meticulous preparations, there was no reason for failure at all. Definitely, absolutely, assuredly—None.

However—

(Fear-in-Cube, Demon Blade Muramasa, Yamimagari Pakuaki's sister, I never expected them to participate as well...)

Had the goal been discovered? Did those girls enter the contest because they learned about the Wathe, «Râmnicevč Village Rulebook»? This possibility seemed quite likely. Although they probably did not know everything, at least they already caught on to the fact that winning the school beauty pageant would make it possible to learn Nirushaaki's true identity. Those girls intended to take first place for themselves in order to prevent this from happening.

But calm down—Laurica whispered to herself.

Do you have any reason for losing? Impossible.

The perfume's power could be considered a trump card. Some variation was inevitable, but combining all the boys with the first-year girls, the votes should pretty much tally more than half. It might be possible for the opposing side to discover her during the instant when she used the perfume Wathe, but so long as she evaded capture, there would be no problem. Laurica was going to delay until the last second to use it, then hide somewhere and wait for the voting to finish.

She had neither any reason to meet defeat nor any intention to lose. In other words, she was not going to lose.

Carefully without letting anyone see her, Laurica clenched her fist.

Accompanied by pain in her lower abdomen, Laurica recalled the face of her idol while vowing firmly in her mind.

(Lilyhowell-sama... Please believe in me and wait patiently. I will definitely win!)

But no, this was too difficult.

After serious consideration, Lilyhowell Kilmister reached a conclusion. She believed that Laurica was facing too high a risk. Regardless of Laurica's capability. Lilyhowell disliked uncertainty. Suppose something unexpected caused the plan to fail, then the situation might be unsalvageable.

But confirming once again would not be meaningless.

"Is this the truth?"

'—If you have any doubts, just go there and see for yourself. You can also phone the one who infiltrated the school.'

"I am not doubting but confirming. Fear-in-Cube's faction has noticed and entered the contest. Is that correct?"

'Correct.'

The owner of the voice on the telephone—the "collaborator" in this operation—did not show any signs of hesitation. Although produced through a voice changer, the mechanical voice did not seem to be lying.

Lilyhowell was using the speaker phone to allow others nearby to hear the person's voice. Neto was occupying the sofa selfishly, laughing loudly:

"Heehaha! People have appeared to get in our way!? Yeah, I never believed that such a boring plan could have gone smoothly from start to finish!"

"This is merely a possible hindrance and does not equate to failure yet."

"But that means failure is possible later, right? Heehaw!"

He was right. That was the same conclusion Lilyhowell had reached after much consideration.

"—Indeed. Perhaps victory cannot be assured. But we of the 87th Knight Squad «Lilyhowell Neto» have no need of any victory except assured victory."

"After all, everything is pointless if we fail. Heehaha!"

'...Do you have any solution?'

Lilyhowell did not trust the other side even as a collaborator. Having confirmed a number of times, for the moment she could conclude that the other side "possessed information of a highly trustworthy nature and that there should not be any risk in making use of that information at the current stage." Regarding the collaborator, all they knew was that this person bore a grudge against Nirushaaki just like the Knights' Dominion. Hence, Lilyhowell's answer was naturally—

"Yes. As much as I am reluctant to employ it. However, I cannot tell you what it is."

"Is that so?"

The collaborator gave up on the answer so readily that Lilyhowell suddenly felt suspicious. Perhaps this person already knew what they were planning to do. Nevertheless, what needed to be done could not be changed.

"Have you said everything? In that case, we must begin the operation at once. Thank you for the information you provided."

'Same here. Well then—I look forward to your success. May Nirushaaki get what she deserves.'

The line was cut with a beep. Lilyhowell put down the home telephone's handset and sighed. After hearing that name from the handset, Neto's face suddenly lost all expression and started exuding the sharp and cruel aura as the avenger. But this time, it only manifested outwardly for an instant.

"So not funny at all... No, this is definitely funny, it's killing me with laughter! Heeheehahaha! Squad Leader, oh Squad Leader! Now that Fear-in-Cube's faction is out to meddle with us, we can't leave the entire mission to "Trash" alone, so what can we do? We're gonna use the method that you dislike?"

Neto was asking rhetorically. Lilyhowell buried her displeasure into the depths of her heart.

"—I will use what was prepared for emergencies. It has apparently been delivered safely from our home country. In other words, I shall rely on that thing and you, Neto."

"Heehahaha! It's that butthole gas, right!? That thing called the disabling gas, right?"

"That is correct."

Correct in name—She added in her mind. That type of gas was able to cause rapid unconsciousness but also left behind serious aftereffects and other problems. This gas was once used to deal with a large-scale terrorist act. Among the hostages, numbering over nine hundred, roughly one tenth of them died as a result.

"Heehaha! In other words, first we'll fill that gym with gas to put all those bastard butthole students to sleep, then I shall use the opportunity to load my gun with this photo of 'pain' caused by that butthole bitch a long time ago then stab every one of these students. Because I have the kind of body that feels extreme pleasure when returning pain to the one who inflicted the original wound, I'll surely orgasm once I stab the bitch who may be lying down among the fainted students! Once I find her, I can make her butthole climax directly! Heehaw~!"

Lilyhowell disliked it. She extremely disliked it.

The gas risked leaving aftereffects or even causing death. In order to find the enemy, Neto had to hurt people with the bayonet as well. She originally wanted to remind Neto to avoid vitals as much as possible, but whether Neto would listen would depend on his mood at the time. She imagined Neto going "Oops, my hand slipped, heehaha!" while stabbing people in the face, breasts or genitals. He was the kind of man who derived pleasure from such acts.

Lilyhowell absolutely believed that this was not the right path. However—
(I am neither a member of the clergy nor a paladin.)

She was just a simple knight. A knight who wished to destroy Wathes. Everyone was mad and most likely, she was mad too. She was self-aware. And this self-awareness of hers was very likely akin to madness as well.

Indeed. At least she wished for herself—to be mad in an orthodox manner. Hence she asked herself. Was this right?

Both right and wrong at the same time.

The road ahead carried the both the significance of avenging her fallen comrades and ultimately, the significance of destroying contemptible Wathes.

Since the direction she ought to follow was not wrong, she must proceed with it. Even if ordinary people might be harmed. But currently, there was no time to turn back and find a new path.

"Order all members to assemble. Prepare yourself as well."

"Understood. Heehaha~ Looks like this will turn in a delightful butthole festival!"

While walking to her room (or rather, the bedroom serving as her room in the Kagidou house), Lilyhowell saw Neto jump up from the sofa from the corner of her eye. While walking to her room, she had already started unbuttoning her shirt. Even she found this such behavior too impatient, but it could not be helped.

Because as the squad leader, it would be utterly unsightly to arrive late due to spending too much time putting on formal attire.

"—May Nirushaaki get what she deserves."

Closing her cellphone, she heard a voice from behind.

"I knew it, I still can't get motivated. This is going in a far too roundabout manner."

"It can't be helped. There's no point if this incident concludes during the school beauty pageant. Whether the «Nest Parasitoid» plan... Or the other plan that cannot be opposed due to orders to assist coming from the higher-ups."

Looking back at Fourteen, Ontenzaki Satsuko spoke with a slightly wry smile.

Part 6

It was time for the beauty pageant contestants to begin their performances. Haruaki was also watching from the side. Even when sitting in the secondary standby area that was screened off using partitions, he could still see what was happening on stage. The girl holding the globe to imitate a celebrity comedian under the watchful gaze of the boy who seemed to be the club president (the audience reacted with abundant laughter); a shy and introverted representative from an arts club used a barely audible voice to recite Goethe poetry (obtaining some slight support from the

audience); a swimming club member in a swimsuit, simulating swimming in the air (the other contestants yelled: "So superficial!"); then there was the brawny judo club girl dressed in a training uniform, shouting vigorously while exhibiting break-fall movements (seeking victory through impact?). Furthermore—

"Two more then it's my turn... Okay, I'm going!"

Fear exhaled hard through her nostrils and glanced at Haruaki.

"I worked so hard on practicing so I forbid you to miss anything. Open your eyes wide and watch carefully!"

"Ah... Yeah. I have no idea what you're going to do, but good luck."

"Fear-senpai, do your best~! If you show everyone the results of your training, there's definitely no problem!"

Under the gaze of the vigorously waving Yume, Fear walked over to the side of the stage. Soon after—

"Okay, thank you for your performance! Up next is... The one who only signed up just before the contest started, the little silver angel from overseas, belonging to no club, Fear Cubrick-san—!"

Hearing the calls of the male student serving as the host, Fear strode her way to the center of the stage, looking a bit nervous. The host tilted the microphone towards Fear and asked: "What kind of performance have you prepared?" Fear nodded vigorously once and took out the usual cube from her pocket.

"I will solve this Rubik's cube."

"Ohoh? But is it really okay? You've only got three minutes."

Fear smiled proudly and said:

"—More than enough. The problem is actually what am I going to do with the excess time."

Ohoh~ The audience clamored as a result of her boastful words. Haruaki whispered in Yume's ear:

"She's been practicing that continually since yesterday? Can she really finish in three minutes?"

"On average, it usually takes her roughly two minutes and thirty seconds to solve. Of course it can't compare with world records but that's still very amazing, right?"

"Seriously? That's really amazing... I hope she won't exceed the time limit because of nervousness. When the three minutes pass and she's still not finished, it'll be bad if she refuses to leave the stage."

"We can only trust in Fear-senpai."

With both hands, Yume clutched the toy cube she had bought on her own to form a pair with Fear's, as though treating it like a talisman.

"So—" The host raised his arm high up in the air. Fear lightly lifted the Rubik's cube before her chest.

Originally filled with noise, the gym gradually quieted down and returned to silence.

In that instant, Haruaki felt as though time had stopped.

He was unable to shift his eyes away from Fear who was standing on the stage. Probably due to concentrating hard, her face was expressionless to the point of exuding a sense of mystery. Gazing at the shape in her hands that resembled her form, her eyes transcended the mundane world and displayed no wavering at all. The lighting overhead caused her hair to shine and sparkle as though her existence itself were an untouchable silver statue.

She looked extremely beautiful and breathtaking—

"Start!"

The host's hand swung down. Haruaki also regained his senses. At the same time, Fear began to swivel the cube. This was not the aimless swiveling she used to partake to dispel boredom. Fear's eyes could already picture the cube's solved form. First she completed one face. Then rotating or swiveling the Rubik's cube, the colors gradually grew uniform—

Sweat appeared on Fear's brow. "Crap." Yume muttered softly. Was nervousness interfering with Fear's movements? "It's already two minutes." The host announced. Fear anxiously turned the cube over. Calm down, Haruaki clenched his fist and prayed. Two minutes and twenty seconds... Thirty seconds—Still not done yet. Forty seconds—Just like magic, the

cube in Fear's hands could be seen with the majority of its colors in place. Finally with twist and a turn, she clutched the Rubik's cube.

Just as the host's countdown reached two minutes and fifty seconds, Fear finished the Rubik's cube.

Placing the toy cube on her palm, Fear presented it forward. As the audience, the students spent some time to confirm and comprehend. However, Fear seemed to have mistaken the audience's delay as time remaining from the three minute limit. Nunu? For an instant, her gaze moved left and right in confusion, then she made her best possible performance within the remaining ten seconds—

Smile~

Fear made a perfectly flawless smile that was very much in her style.

Hence, ten seconds later—The host shouted: "Three minutes! That was splendid, achieved perfectly!" However, his voice was almost drowned out by the cheering and applause filling up the gym.

"Yes! That's the smile, Fear-senpai! I knew that this ultimate secret weapon had to be brought out in the end! Perhaps this proves that I was right in saying this was enough at the start!"

Clutching her own Rubik's cube, Yume made a victory pose emotionally. Kuroe and Sovereignty also high-fived each other and acted very happy. On the other hand—

"I-It's nothing amazing. Yes, nothing at all. But why is the cheering so loud...!?"

"Ooh. Other people's affairs are none of my business. I just have to fight to the best of my ability. But honestly, my stomach is beginning to ache. Is it my illusion? Absolutely ridiculous..."

Two people were each murmuring in gloom while shaking their head.

Soon after, Fear returned to the secondary standby area. Sovereignty and Yume rushed forward to hug her from both sides. Meanwhile, Fear was glaring viciously at Haruaki for some reason.

"...Comments?"

"G-Good job. It's really amazing. You must have spent a lot of time practicing. I'm very impressed and also amazed."

He answered sincerely from the heart.

To be honest, Fear's performance was more modest and simple than the girls from any of the clubs. Neither wearing striking outfits nor making glamorous movements. However, because of that—

The existence of Fear as a girl, combined with certain dazzling traits she possessed, seemed especially genuine.

Hence, Haruaki believed this was excellent. Fear did not need anything extra. Simply performing that on stage was enough. As her strategist, Yume also understood this, right? If that were the case, she really lived up to her part as the junior who worshiped Fear.

Probably sensing that his praise came from the heart, Fear blushed and turned her face away.

"H-Hmph! Something on that level is achievable with just a bit of practice. If I practice even more, I'll immediately rewrite the world record. But I don't want to do that expressly. Because as good as it is to be an amazing woman, too amazing a woman would make people back off. I don't really get it but that's the way it is."

Haruaki wondered: What kind of way to hide embarrassment is this? But now it was time to reward Fear for finishing the first task, hence he brought a foldable chair for her to sit on. As though saying "thanks," Fear plopped herself down on the seat.

"Phew~ Hmm, but I think the mood was roused quite intensely. This could very well win first place! No, it'll surely win! Fufufu!"

"Good job~! Look at that charming intellect and magnificently nimble fingers! Senpai, you've completed a performance that no one can imitate. Too perfect! I believe I can already address you as Your Majesty the Queen!"

Haruaki told himself again that it was currently time to reward Fear for her efforts first. Hence, he did not tactlessly remind them that there was still the speech coming up next.

He really did not believe that Fear and Yume, this cheerful, careless and energetic pair, would be attentive enough to prepare a plan for the speech segment.

Part 7

She was currently wrapped in a cape. This attire would probably turn many heads in this country. But since what lay beneath would attract even more attention, wearing a cape was the only choice.

In an empty spot that was born in this town by chance, this was a deserted forest behind a graveyard.

A total of fifteen knights were waiting for her to speak.

Including Neto, almost everyone was dressed in clothing that would not stand out too much in this country. She was the only one in a cape. Nevertheless, she believed this was fine. Dressing conspicuously meant that the enemy would likely target her when a situation arose. Even though it was just her own one-sided thinking, she believed this was also one of the duties a squad leader ought to fulfill.

Lilyhowell swept her gaze over her subordinates.

"Command number one—Recall the names of friends, recall their faces, recall the joy you had partaken in destroying Wathes together. Recall the tears you have shed together in the past. Also, recall their dying screams and the names carved upon their tombstones."

With every word she spoke, the subordinates' expressions gradually changed. Even Neto was muttering: "Of course, it's not funny at all..." His presence felt as keen and refined as a sharpened blade. Their eyes were furnaces while her words were their firewood. The air burned coldly while their gazes were freezing hot.

"Command number two—Recall the enemy who caused all this, recall her foolishness in holding tightly to Wathes in pursuit of greater strength, and recall the legitimate punishment that needs to be administered to that person."

This was necessary preparation for what was needed to be done next. This was for the sake of the ugly and sweet revenge that was imminent, a ritual to brand their bodies and minds. Now, now, the time for accomplishing the mission was right now.

Naturally, the final words to declare an end to this ritual were—

"That is all. 87th Knights Squadron «Lilyhowell Nate»—Begin the assault!"

Part 8

"C-Class Rep, are you okay?"

"No problem. I am... going..."

Kirika could feel her stomach convulsing in pain, but still she walked over to the standby area next to the stage. This could be called the true standby area like in a drama club's public performance. Since boys were forbidden from entering, several girls were changing into the tennis wear or rhythmic gymnastic leotards of their respective clubs without worrying. Naturally, Kirika could not wear anything too sensational. Too risky.

Hence... At least in terms of what she was able—

(Only... this. Indeed... There's only... this...!)

She wanted to win, not losing to anyone. Whether Fear or Konoha. Or anyone else.

In front of him, she wanted to declare—Ueno Kirika is right here!

Hence, Kirika mustered all her willpower, abandoning the final vestiges of shame lingering in her heart—

Slowly, she fished out that object from her schoolbag.

Then Haruaki saw it.

The instant she appeared on stage, Kirika's performance was already 80% complete.

"Uh... Here is Ueno... Kirika... -san... Umm, uh, let's not bother with the trivial things! Okay, please start your performance, contestant! Okay, let's start!"

The host spoke with a little resignation, handing the microphone over to Kirika.

Kirika's face was flaming red as though on fire.

Her body kept trembling while she lifted one hand at the same time—

"M-Meow—..."

Then in a barely audible voice, she spoke the word that best matched the cat ears worn on her head.

Rooted to the spot, Haruaki froze while watching this scene.

"..."

Probably everyone in the gym felt the same way.

In the next instant, Kirika rapidly dashed off the stage to escape, giving up on the remainder of the performance time.

Noisy chattering... Feeling like water gradually seeping into the ground, ripples began spreading in the gym. That Ueno-san... Class Rep... How refreshing. So surprising. But that's really something. So very cute too—The people commenting were almost all second-year students acquainted with Kirika, but purely due to the massive gap in contrast with her usual straitlaced demeanor, there were quite a few first-years and third-years praising her as well.

"Muumuu. Somehow it feels like something similar happened before... Hmm? Hey, why are you hiding? Everyone is reacting positively to you. Don't be shy, hold your head high and stick out your chest openly!"

"Ah... H-Hold on, Fear-kun, I... haven't prepared myself mentally yet... Hold on...!"

Fear was observant enough to spot Kirika hiding behind the door to the standby area by the stage and dragged her out by force. Naturally, the cat ears were already gone from Kirika's head.

"Ooh... Ah..."

Still blushing to her ears, Kirika groaned while glancing awkwardly towards Haruaki. Affected by her, Haruaki also gradually recalled certain embarrassing memories.

There was one time when Kirika visited their house. Konoha and Kuroe were absent at the time with only Fear at home. Then a strange package arrived in the mail, containing something similar to what Kirika was wearing just now—

"Ooh... Wahhhhhh! Y-Yachi! Come over here!"

Without warning, Kirika dragged Haruaki to a corner of the standby area. Placing her arms across the sides of his cheeks with her palms against the walls, she prevented him from escaping the corner as though mugging or blackmailing him. The simple question occupying Haruaki's mind slipped out of his mouth:

"U-Umm... Class Rep, could it be that you actually remember what happened that time—"

"Which time is that time!? Why don't you try explaining it clearly, absolutely ridiculous...!"

"So, basically—"

Haruaki continued to recall the situation back then. Kirika had been controlled by a set of cursed cat ears. She had sat on his lap, or squeezed into a narrow space with him or hugged him or licked him. No no, are these things supposed to be recalled? If Kirika could still remember and now she was wearing cat ears, what did that imply? So she did not remember after all? What on earth was going on—

Haruaki's mind grew more and more confused. He felt that his face was turning even redder than Kirika's.

Kirika kept gazing at him intently. Could she tell that his face was red? As though trying to make herself accept, she nodded once with a forceful attitude.

"Very well, let's just leave it at that. Tentatively... Just think of it like this for now. Looks like this was not totally meaningless. At least it achieved half of the effect I wanted. Absolutely ridiculous. No, this is not ridiculous. Oh fine, if you realized something then go head and realize it, that's what this is about. No problem, right?"

"Eh? Uh, even if you ask me if there's any problem—"

"NO. PROBLEM. RIGHT?"

Under Kirika's intimidation, Haruaki nodded repeatedly. To be honest, he had no idea what she was trying to say.

"Very good." Kirika nodded then turned around and released Haruaki. Then she declared briefly: "I'm going to the washroom" and quickly left the standby area.

What's going on—Just as Haruaki sighed...

"Haruaki-kun."

"Oh Konoha. It's almost your turn, right?"

"That's right—So, I won't lose! Please watch me carefully!"

Haruaki was stunned by her exceptional seriousness and could only answer: "S-Sure." Konoha clenched her fist tightly and cheered for herself then carried the luggage she had prepared to the main standby area by the stage. However, she stopped walking along the way.

"But... Suddenly thinking about it calmly, what I'm doing next is..."

"Oh no! Come come come, Kono-san, wait up wait up! Hello~ Listen carefully to me~"

With lightning speed, Kuroe swiftly ran over to Konoha and started whispering in her ear:

"Kono-san, do you really understand? The most important thing is to get serious..."

"..."

"...Sense of shame... Grit your teeth... Haru's... Cough cough. Kono-san. Okay? Are you fine?"

"Eh? What are you talking about, of course I'm fine. Ahaha. Ahahaha. Ahahahaha—Victory belongs to me alone!"

Then once again, with unnecessary vigor, Konoha proceeded forward, disappearing into the side of the stage.

"...I feel like I just witnessed a very dangerous scene."

"I have this feeling too. Hey Kuroe, what did you do to Cow Tits?"

"Hmm~? Oh my~ After all, it's really a bit difficult for her without drinking alcohol. I simply helped her open the switch in her heart and soul. Yes, since Kono-san deliberately wants to do this, I don't think you guys need to

worry~ Anyway, please look forward to Kono-san's grand performance next!"

For some reason, Kuroe's confident speech made Haruaki and Fear feel even more worried.

Cha~ Raccha raccha raccha~ ra~

While the lighting remained dim, a familiar melody started playing in the gym. That was—indeed, Haruaki remembered this melody being played every Sunday morning. This morning during breakfast, he had heard it coming from the television as well.

After the intro to this opening song finished, just like what was heard on television every time, the voice actress playing the protagonist would yell out the title of that anime—

"...Magical Scorching Girl☆Magical Infernon! Take this—" ^[4]

Then while that sweet and beautiful voice was singing the theme song fluently, the spotlight hit the stage. In the next instant, jumping into that circle of light was—

"A-Ah...!"

Haruaki felt the ground shake beneath him. The world had been turned upside down. His knees lost strength. The shock was that monumental. Simply to remain standing was taking all his effort.

Illuminated under the spotlight was the female protagonist of an anime aimed towards a female demographic. A glamorous display of vivid colors, an outfit decorated with many frills and inexplicably revealing. Ahhh, clearly the costume was revealing enough already, but standing on stage, she possessed a mature figure that the actual anime protagonist could not compare with. The miniskirt felt inexorably dangerous. The thighs were salaciously exposed. Most notable were the curves of the outfit's chest portion that the anime's elementary school protagonist absolutely could not produce, resulting in deep cleavage of unparalleled destructive power, looking as though they could pop out any moment.

She—namely, Konoha, of course—

To think she would dress up in this manner, who could have expected it? Haruaki could not help but doubt if this was reality. Impossible, this must be a dream. But he could not hear the sounds of his alarm clock anywhere.

A smile was written over Konoha's face, a radiant smile that did not collapse. Spinning around, she made the trademark pose and held it still for a second. Then lip-syncing with the lyrics, she started to dance, twirling a long rod in her hands like a baton.

"That's right, Kono-san, wonderful, wonderful...! Right now, surpassing even the real thing, Kono-san is Magical Scorching Girl Infernon, hailing from the Inferno Kingdom to turn the human world into scorched earth! And that sensational body is exuding the same aura as the adult-version Infernon-sama that appeared in episode twelve! Yes yes, the performance of the scorched earth mechanism staff «Hell Flame» is also very perfect—!"

"Y-You... I knew it was you...!?"

"I'm only responsible for directing the acting. As usual, the costume is borrowed from the laundry shopkeeper."

While answering, Kuroe still panted "muuh~" and stared intently at the stage, using her cellphone to take pictures of Konoha nonstop. Haruaki shifted his gaze slightly to see the returned Kirika, Shiraho and the rest of them staring dumbfounded with their mouths gaping open while Fear was rolling about on the floor, clutching her gut silently as though saying "give me a break" while stomping the ground.

The song continued to play. Konoha also continued dancing steps that were supposed to emulate the opening completely. Her miniskirt fluttered up while she bent her knees and smiled, brandishing the magic stick that was as long as a spear. When she jumped occasionally, sweat drops could be seen scattering outwards lightly. An unexpectedly intense and dangerous dance. Haruaki felt very unsettled for some reason. Clearly a more gentle and quiet dance would do. He did not want the students below the stage to get any closer to her.

"Okay, it's time for the finale...!"

The song increased in excitement, reaching the climax. As though led by Konoha who was dancing with total immersion, the audience began to clap along with the beat like attending an idol's concert normally. The climax

concluded. The outro was ending on a trailing note. In tune with the rhythm, Konoha spun and pulled the magic staff towards herself—

Just as the last note of the song was heard, Konoha maintained that pose, holding the magic staff still against her and leaning her body forward. The almost overflowing, bulging existence strongly emphasized its presence. Pressed deeply into the cleavage, the magic staff seemed to further highlight this fact. Then Konoha sat on the lower portion of the magic staff like a witch riding a broom, clamping the staff tightly between her thighs. This part of the staff was also being pressed down firmly, resulting in a very precarious state for the hem of her skirt.

After the song ended, silence descended upon the surroundings. Konoha raised one hand in this state and pointed in Haruaki's direction. Haruaki could help but get a feeling that she really was pointing accurately at him in the standby area.

Then Konoha yelled out words that were identical to the anime's trademark catchphrase.

"Your heart, I shall incinerate it to scorched blackness too♪"

This time, things really froze completely. Time stopped for several seconds in the gym.

Then the world began to turn again.

Wowwww... The students began to raise an uproar. Some of the students applauded her genuine performance. Some students cheered and yelled as loud as they could: "Infernnon~!" (Probably members of either the anime research club or the manga research club.) There were also sounds of dumbfounded snickering or bewilderment. But of course, there was also a silver-haired creature that was not only snickering but also convulsing while lying on the floor, roaring with laughter. "I'm done for! I'm dying, I'm really gonna die! Puhahahauhyahyaha!"

Konoha maintained the trademark pose, holding her position with an aura like a warrior who had just concluded a battle. Several seconds later, she exhaled. Then as though regaining her senses from a daze, she swept her gaze across the gym's interior, then opening her dainty mouth slightly, her face instantly flushed red and turned deathly pale in the next second. Immediately after that—

"H-Hya ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

With speed rivaling Kirika's just now, Konoha covered her bosom with her hands while fleeing to the side of the stage.

"Oh crap. It's very good that she finished the dance successfully but Kono-san seems to have revived her sense of shame that had forcefully been suppressed for the sake of this performance until now... Hmm, I hope this doesn't cause any deaths."

With an extremely serious expression, Kuroe quietly spoke inauspicious words.

Part 9

"Team One has reached the school's outskirts, getting into position. All teams, status report."

'Team Two, preparations complete for raping butholes! My fellow is already as hard as rock, heehaha!'

Then through the communicator, Teams Three and Four also reported normal.

"Then let us begin."

Lilyhowell handed the trunk containing the gas cylinder to a subordinate then started walking. Every team was carrying the same kind of trunk. Unexpected incidents could happen at any time. Hence, with each team carrying one of them, the chances of affecting the battle plan were minimized even if one of the teams failed to reach their assigned position.

The main gates were tightly shut. For a school surrounded by tall walls on all sides, this was the easiest place to enter and consequently the easiest to deploy security. As someone who sought to pursue the right path, Lilyhowell courageously attempted to invade through the main gates.

She realized the instant she stood before the metal gates. An unexpected incident had already happened.

"Squad Leader Lilyhowell, what's the matter?"

"Someone is watching us. Looks like the other side will not be that easy to handle."

She replied concisely to the subordinate's question. She could sense two lines of sight. One was a security camera artfully installed above the gates. This was not a problem. What required attention was the other one.

Far ahead in the distance, a gaze came from the top of the school building—

From this distance, the other side could only watch them without being able to react immediately. Neither could she and her team react instantly to the other side. In the end, that gaze simply announced a simple fact: that their invasion was about to be discovered. In that case—

"There is no need to be sneaky like a thief."

Whispering softly, she lifted her cape and drew out a greatsword from behind her.

This was the shape that represented the meaning of her existence, the weight that represented the meaning of her existence.

As the leader of these knights who engaged in wrongdoing and madness.

At least she wanted to walk along this right path within her sight. Neither traversing over by force nor bowing subserviently to squeeze through gaps, she would walk proudly with her head high and chest out.

This was herself, Lilyhowell Kilmister.

Hence, she raised the greatsword and swung hard, destroying the metal gates.

As a declaration of war, this ear-splitting sound of shattering was probably quite sufficient.

Part 10

"Ahhh... Owwwww... Ahhh..."

Konoha stumbled her way, returning from the side of the stage, her eyes looking a bit glazed over. Seeing Konoha glance at him in a pleading manner, Haruaki frantically said:

"W-Welcome back! I-I think it was great... Yeah!"

"...Honestly?"

"Y-Yeah, I saw a very new and refreshing side to you. The dancing was great too. Also, uh—"

"Am I cute?"

"S-Sure."

However, Konoha did not accept it. Exuding a demonic aura that normally never appeared, she asked in a deep voice:

"Please say clearly with your mouth. Say: Konoha is so cute."

"K-Konoha is so cute..."

"Again."

Konoha approached Haruaki with zombie-like pressure, causing Haruaki to yell almost like a scream:

"Konoha is so cute!"

"U-fufu... Fufu... Ufufufu! Excellent~ I have to calm down now. Using that sentence to anchor my heart and soul, to return my mind to normal levels. The scene just now can be forgotten. Nothing happened at all. I did not do anything embarrassing. In the end, you simply praised me for being very cute. That's all that happened..."

Konoha was murmuring to convince herself when Fear patted her on the shoulder. Without any sense of derision or laughter, simply with eyes filled with sympathy from the bottom of her heart, Fear said:

"Yeah. You did very well. Seriously very well... Hurry and take a break. Take care as well on the other side."

"Hold on! Where are you assuming I'll be going!?"

"Y-You won't realize until I say it out? This illness is serious... It's perfectly clear if you look at yourself objectively! Hey Kuroe, show her the photos you just took!"

"Oh no! Ficchi..."

"PHO.TOS?"

Konoha's face spun around to confront Kuroe. Although Haruaki could not see the expression Konoha was making, he could see the despair on

Kuroe's face as she cowered and took a step back. Konoha reached towards her.

"Please hand the memory card over."

"No, Ficchi made a mistake. I didn't record any of Kono-san's rare appearance just now—"

"So what you mean is I am allowed to destroy the card along with the entire camera?"

"It's this one, sorry, please forgive me!"

Trembling nonstop, Kuroe took out the digital camera's memory card and handed it to Konoha. Instantly, the card was silently shredded while resting on Konoha's palm. Although just a little bit, Haruaki could not help but think "what a shame," only to hear Shiraho murmur with exasperation from the bottom of her heart:

"Hmph. Had I known, I should have brought my camera as well. With this as blackmail material, perhaps I could reach an agreement with you people, never to get involved with Sovereignty and me ever again."

After Fear, Kirika and Konoha finished their performances, the school beauty pageant was still continuing. There were many opponents. The contestants brought out everything at their disposal to rouse the atmosphere on scene. The girl who seemed to be Yume's friend also imitated an idol singer's song, obtaining much cheering and applause. To be honest, at the current stage, apart from a couple contestants who clearly suffered cold receptions, Haruaki felt that anyone could win. Was the infiltrator from the Knights' Dominion one of the students who had already performed, or was she among the ones who were about to enter the stage?

That said, there were only two or three people left to perform. Once all of them finished, next was the speech segment where all contestants had to stand on stage together. But at this moment—

"Please allow me to speak in fear and trepidation."

Isuzu spoke up without warning, staring straight at Haruaki's group with a very solemn expression. Only after confirming that the uninvolved Yume was standing some distance away to watch the performances did she continue:

"I have received a report from Toonisuzu and others on the roof. Visitors are coming from four directions."

"Visitors...? Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two, what are you talking about?"

"Bluntly stated—Invaders have appeared in this school."

"What did you say!?"

Hearing what Isuzu said, everyone's expressions froze instantly.

"As janitors, maintaining order and security in school seems to be part of the job~ Especially when today is a special festival occasion. So as a precaution, we decided to use our special traits to take on the responsibility of keeping watch~"

Haruaki finally understood why Isuzu was present despite being completely uninvolved with the school beauty pageant—because if anything happened, she could instantly contact them. On further thought, the kagura bells' telepathic communication was instantaneous and quite outstanding in functioning as a contact network.

"Yes. Thanks for your girls helping to keep watch. I'd really like to give you a rice cracker as a reward, but now's not the time. The invaders are from the Knights' Dominion? Why? What are they doing here?"

"I had been thinking all along that they might take action... But I didn't expect them to actually do it."

"Yeah. Isuzu-kun, you said that visitors are coming from four directions. What do you mean by that?"

"Literally what the words say~ There are four teams of four each, roughly, each coming from a different direction. Oh dear, they are currently destroying the school gates and climbing over the walls, the invasion has started beyond doubt~"

"The other side mentioned once that they had ten-odd people. So in other words, all of them are here...!?"

"By the way, judging from where they're headed, the destination appears to be the gym here."

"Wait... They're coming here? It's fine if you guys want to fight, but don't get us involved!"

Chihaya exclaimed with surprise. She was right. Unrelated students definitely could not be allowed to get caught up.

"W-What should we do? You girls still need to give your speeches on stage. On the other hand, Kuroe and I can still take action..."

"Absolutely ridiculous. How could the two of you possibly handle enemies coming from four sides?"

A crisis—Haruaki thought. The Knights' Dominion had arrived. Although it was unclear what their goal was, the entire school's students were gathered in the gym. They definitely must not get their way. Due to the size of the gym, blocking enemies coming from the north side would mean leaving the other three sides undefended. Haruaki really wanted to pin down the enemies on every side.

But did they have enough combat strength to handle four groups? Fear, Konoha and Kirika must win in the school beauty pageant. If the infiltrator was allowed to take first place, Nirushaaki, mixed in the students, would be in life-threatening danger. This risk could not be neglected.

What should they do? The school beauty pageant and the enemies outside. How to handle both these matters—

The members of Haruaki's group exchanged glances with one another. Fear was the first to speak up:

"In the end—I'm very willful. I wanna protect everything that can be protected. Whether Nirushaaki who wants to become an ordinary student or the normal students who might end up as her friends. Grouping things roughly, these are the two that we have to protect. I don't wanna sacrifice either side. I want to protect them both at the same time."

Haruaki understood why Fear was saying this. She had probably superimposed Nirushaaki with herself. Abandoning battle, hoping to exist as an ordinary human. She wanted to prove that this wish should be realized and it could actually be realized. Because she was walking along the same path right now.

"Winning the school beauty pageant will protect Nirushaaki while defeating the invaders will protect the other normal students. In other words, my

willfulness requires doing both of these. So I've come up with a solution simply by applying the right person to the right job. This will boil our options down to one. What are everyone's thoughts?"

"This feels like it's one of those choices where you'll regret the wrong choice. If so, I'm in with you."

"Argh, damn it, to think I did so much... And even did that! Hoo~ No matter, since I did get praised 'so cute'—Apart from that, everything will be erased from memory, so be it!"

"The task that only we can accomplish while leaving the other task to a certain someone apart from us. A very well-defined boundary—So that leaves only one path to take."

Fear and the girls all nodded and started moving to exit the standby area, leaving Haruaki behind. But along the way, they all passed by a certain location. Every single one of them placed their hand on the shoulder of the girl who was simply resting her chin on her hand, listening as though nothing concerned her. The last to reach out was Fear who spoke on behalf of the group:

"Shiraho, we're depending on you."

"Wha—What? What nonsense are you talking about?"

Shiraho's elbow slid to the side. Fear's eyes were incomparably serious.

"If it's you, we can leave things to you without worry—Rather, you're the only one we can ask. We will handle the enemies outside. I hope to rely on you to handle the situation inside the gym. Please win first place and protect Nirushaaki."

"Wait, you can't just decide on your own! I'd rather die than participate—Besides, it's already too late!"

"If you mean the sign up deadline, there's still time. That's because the performance segment still hasn't ended. As long as you sign up right away, you should be able to enter at the last minute—We're running out of time. Sorry for asking this of you."

"Like I said, don't just decide on your own...!"

Shiraho was trembling from anger. But it was true that they were running out of time. The Knights' Dominion had invaded the school already. After

casting a glance of complete trust towards Shiraho, Fear's group exited the standby area.

"Shiraho..."

"I'm not going to enter, how could I possibly enter!? I can't believe she decided all on her own... This is no joke!"

After Sovereignty called out to her, Shiraho smashed her fist against the table. Haruaki could understand why she was so angry but at the same time, he could also understand how Fear and the girls felt, entrusting everything to her.

"...Sorry. But having gone through so much preparation, even suppressing their embarrassment and trying hard until now, Fear-chan and the others forfeited so readily. That's because they believe you'll surely win first place. Of course, I believe in you too. So please."

"I'm not going to listen to you people. My answer remains the same. I have neither reason nor wish for entering."

"Fear-chan also said that all the school's students, including Nirushaaki... Rather, yeah, overall, it's all the same. We want to protect everyone in this school without sacrificing any one of them, that's why this is the only way—Yes, in the end, that's what it's about. To protect everyone. If we don't rely on you, we are out of options. Although this is a very unfair way of putting it."

"Honestly—Too unfair...!"

Haruaki could see Shiraho gnashing her teeth. Sovereignty was making a pleading look while Chihaya's expression seemed to show anticipation. Next, Shiraho clicked her tongue with displeasure.

What they needed was some kind of impetus, thought Haruaki to himself. He could only think of one impetus that he was able to create. Hence, Haruaki nonchalantly leaned forward, entering her arm's reach. Instantly—

Smack! A slap to the face came flying through the air. Ouch. But as advance payment, this should be enough.

Feeling the gazes of the nearby crowd focusing on him, Haruaki shrugged and said:

"Then I'm going to help them out. I'm counting on you for the rest."

"—I will definitely kill you one day, human."

Maintaining her hand's pose after the swing of the slap, Shiraho spoke while glaring viciously. Haruaki shrugged again as though saying "please have mercy" then turned around. Quiet whispering could be heard from behind. "Eh? What what? What happened? Where did Fear-senpai run off to?" Included among them was Yume's confused question but that was no longer important. Haruaki felt quite apologetic to Yume because her ongoing cheering and support was in vain.

What was important was the conversation between the three girls apart from Yume.

"Hoo... Sovereignty, please head over to inform the executive committee member."

"Understood~! I will also try to negotiate with him to see if I can buy a bit of preparation time!"

"You there, do you have any makeup on hand? Just the basics will do. If not, just quietly steal some from someone."

"Oh, then I'll go steal some... But makeup?"

You don't really need makeup, right—Chihaya seemed to be implying that, but Shiraho answered in an indifferent tone of voice:

"On stage, the appearance of the face will change due to the lighting. Hence, adjustment using makeup is the best solution if one were to present a perfect look... Honestly, I never expected I would still need to do this again."

Haruaki knew very well what Shiraho used to be called—the theater prodigy.

Hence, she understood very well how to achieve what was known as "the center of attention."

Part 11

Standing at the gym entrance was the teacher in charge of preventing students from skipping out. In hindsight, I should have left through the washroom window, I guess? Haruaki regretted for a second but luckily, the teacher on watch was wielding a metal shovel. Hence, he passed safely.

"Is that so? Although I wish to help very much, I will probably end up a burden again—Go ahead. If the enemies get through to here, I shall protect the students even at the cost of my life."

"We're going to intercept them to prevent exactly that from happening. Yes, but just in case, I'm counting on you when the time comes, Sensei."

The group consisting of Haruaki, Fear, Konoha, Kuroe and Kirika left the gym. At the same time, four shrine maidens emerged from the shadows. They were probably ready to lead them to the enemies' positions. In the end, they had no choice but to divide themselves into four teams. Just at this moment—

"Looks like we made it in time. We shall help as well."

"Ah~ Hoo~ Not only do I need to go to work on Sunday but also this extra job... All I can say is I'm really so tired~"

Zenon and Ganon also appeared. It looked like they had rushed urgently to school after seeing the invaders through the security cameras. Both of them were capable fighters who could be added to their ranks. Fear looked at everyone and said:

"...Who here thinks they can't deal with two bastard knights at once and will lose unless it's one on one? Raise up your hand."

No one raised a hand. Fear smiled, baring a fang and said:

"Then two people per team is enough. Oh right, in my case, I've got no problem dealing with four bastard knights at once. The same goes for Cow Tits too, probably. After all, you're raising a creature, so in this regard, you're considered two people."

"What are you talking about!?"

While arguing, the teams were assigned. Given her high combat strength, Fear was alone while Kirika teamed up with Kuroe and Zenon went with Ganon. Finally, since Haruaki could only fight while wielding Konoha, he was grouped with Konoha.

Each team was accompanied by a kagura bell shrine maiden. Although they were unable to speak or use norito prayers of wind, they were needed as guides. As the only one capable of casting spells, Isuzu stayed in the gym to serve as a final line of defense just in case. The remaining shrine

maidens were apparently dispersed across roofs and other locations with good visibility, continuing to monitor the enemies' movements.

"Then let's go. If you think you're about to lose, just hurry and cry to a nearby shameless shrine maiden. You should be able to communicate more or less with gestures. I'll come over to help if I have effort to spare."

"You took the very words out of my mouth!"

Hence, the four teams split up and headed in separate directions.

Led by one of the kagura bells, Haruaki moved through the school building with Konoha. They were heading towards the school gates and encountered enemies near the school building's entrance. Konoha readied her knifehand strike and blocked their path.

There were four opponents. Three of them were men in nondescript clothing. Two of them were carrying a large trunk together with one hand each. All of them were armed with weapons including a sword, a spear and an axe. Although there was nothing striking or peculiar about them in appearance, even a layman could see that their weapon motions were very well-trained. Carelessness must be avoided.

Then there was one more. By simple process of elimination, the final person was a woman.

Lilyhowell Kilmister.

She was dressed differently compared to the last encounter at the flower viewing. Haruaki could not help but groan.

"Uwah, that's dressing up way too cool..."

"That is so true. Rather, one could call it anachronistic?"

"Anachronistic? You are totally wrong, Muramasa. A knight's proper attire does not depend on the era."

Beneath the cape on Lilyhowell's shoulders, covering her entire body apart from her face—A shiny and striking set of silver armor.

"Just as what past knights ought to look, as a knight now, I am attired now as I should. That is all."

"So you're pursing what a knight should look like? How utterly ludicrous."

"Yeah. Putting forth a deal verbally but deceiving us. Knights are supposed to be win the respect of others. Liars have no right to be knights."

After hearing them, Lilyhowell narrowed her eyes.

"I also feel quite ashamed but this is necessary... Had we not encountered your group, we would have no need for deception in the first place. In any case, I will apologize honestly on this point."

Apologizing while wielding a weapon, how utterly insincere. Held in Lilyhowell's hand was precisely the greatsword from last time. Although double-edged, one of the blade's edges was serrated like a comb and exhibiting complex shapes.

"Swords of that shape apparently existed once in medieval times... The sword breaker, was it? A sword used to break enemy swords. However, I recall that it was essentially a one-hander. Never have I heard of a sword breaker in the form of a greatsword."

"Precisely. But this is me. Neither running nor hiding, this sword and I declare the meaning of our existence unambiguously. One, look upon it. Two, be afraid. That is all. Be crushed—That is the only declaration I issue to Wathes and their owners. Hence, this sword has strayed from its original purpose as the sword breaker. More accurately—



Lilyhowell slowly lifted the sword to her body's side and continued:

"—It is the «Wathe Breaker»."

"Such cool words coming from you, but your purpose here is for petty vengeance, right?"

"Is that so? In terms of results, you are currently standing in my way. In other words, my fate is to accomplish what I am supposed to do. Or perhaps to overturn this fate, you are willing to step aside?"

"So even a lofty knight is capable of joking?"

Konoha's lips curled lightly as she spoke, but Lilyhowell did not laugh.

"It is only considered fate precisely because it cannot be overturned. Then it can't be helped—Allow me to destroy you, Muramasa!"

The greatsword, existing only for the sake of destroying Wathes, was now being lifted for that very purpose.

Without delay, Kirika whispered what suddenly occurred to her.

"I think this is a good chance."

Hmm? Kuroe casually tilted her head with her usual expression. Kirika smiled slightly wryly.

"In other words, we need to show everyone that we're unexpectedly amazing. Physical power aside, in terms of versatility, we really should put on quite a performance."

"I agree totally~ It somehow feels like we're always treated as weak characters, contrary to the truth, and looked down upon. Not just by enemies but also our comrades!"

"Indeed that's the case. How absolutely ridiculous."

Kirika and Kuroe had arrived at the bicycle parking lot behind the school. In truth, this place was not convenient to move around in. However, this applied to the opposing side as well.

Kirika and Kuroe stood side by side, watching the approaching people as they weaved through the narrow space between school buildings.

Putting aside the very dangerous looking hand-carried trunk, these men did not have any unusual traits. The fact that they were carrying weapons was not enough to list as particularly unusual given the circumstances.

Even so, they were knights. Members of an organization that destroyed Wathes. To this date, they must have each destroyed several or dozens of Wathes, probably. And also involved several or dozens of ordinary humans, proceeding to kill them. Carelessness must be avoided. The scary thing about them was the aura of madness they exuded. Even if their arms were twisted off, they probably might use their severed arms as weapons to attack. This was the existence known as the Knights' Dominion.

"So, let's show them our true power."

"Let's deal with them quickly so that we can go over and help the others. That'll show them our power."

While joking to each other, Kirika and Kuroe kept their eyes on the enemies at all times.

A cursed belt and a cursed doll's hair.

Using their third hands, the two girls were elevating themselves very slowly.

In a narrow space behind the school, Zenon and Ganon were facing off against one of the teams from the Knights' Dominion.

"Honestly, we are probably facing the worst odds."

"Eh~ What do you mean by that? So tiring~"

"It cannot be helped. I am usually in charge of long range support while you engage in protracted battles, Onee-sama, until the enemy reveals an opening. Furthermore, this is four against two. You will be totally mistaken if you think this will be an easy fight."

"...Can I flee?"

"I was just about to throw a knife. When I see something move, I might not be able to resist throwing a knife at it reflexively. If you are prepared for that, please go ahead and do as you please."

Only Fear did not find the numbers to her disadvantage. Because currently, it was already down to one on one.

One of the kagura bells had led Fear to the enemies who had reached the sports ground, just as they happened to pass through the shortest route to the gym, namely, the stone steps on the far end of the sports ground. Fear did not miss out on this perfect opportunity and attacked using the «Morgenstern» from a dead angle on the top step. Three of the men were sent flying in one strike and collapsed on the ground, not moving. What a delightful result.

"Hmm~ So weak. If only you were walking a little more forward."

"Heehaha! That's right! Because we also considered the balance of combat strength, the guys under my command are relatively weak buttholes, which is why I brought three of them! Do you get my drift? You should understand, right~? Heeheeha!"

Below the steps, at the end of the sports ground, Fear and Neto were facing off.

"I'll be blunt, they're just for carrying stuff. Say, that was close, I hope it didn't open from the impact?"

Neto glanced at the three unconscious men, towards the trunk that two of them were carrying just now. Naturally, the trunk had already fallen on the ground from the aftershock of Fear's attack.

"Heehaw, looks like it's fine, how lucky! If the gas spilled out here... Hmm, nothing much, it'll just spread all around. But precious resources shouldn't be wasted, that's too much of a butthole."

"You said... gas?"

"That's right that's right. Ah, you don't know what our goal is? Okay~ Allow me to tell you~ First we'll release the knockout gas in the gym. There might be aftereffects, but we don't care. Then I'll rape every student inside while they're unconscious! I'll feel so much pleasure—! That's the plan!"

"You've lost me—But I know just one thing for sure, I absolutely must stop you!"

Fear readied the «Morgenstern». Neto nodded as though saying "good answer."

"Very well said~ In the end, I still have to get there. In other words, you can stop the operation by stopping me—Heehaw! But can you do it!? Can you stop me!?"

"Hmph! You'll get your answer when I do it!"

Fear instantly closed in and swung down the «Morgenstern». Neto had yet to switch to combat mode—the guitar case, where his weapon was supposed be kept, was still being carried in his hand and of course, the latch was still fastened. However, Fear would not have started attacking if she cared about being underhanded in the first place.

Neto neither moved nor made any effort to defend using the case. "Got him!" Just as Fear thought so—

"!"

The sensation of the impact felt lighter than expected. The metal club's spikes simply caught his arm. More accurately, he allowed the spikes to catch his arm. Had he wanted to evade, he would have definitely evaded successfully. However, he deliberately dodged only slightly, intentionally receiving harm. Why did he do that—?

(...Crap!)

Fear gritted her teeth. She had forgotten who he was. Neto the Avenger.

Neto pulled back once again and happily stared at his bleeding arm.

"Heehee, heehahahaha! Ouch ouch, this damn raping butthole bastard! This really hurts, it hurts so much that my butthole is echoing kuohoho~! Unforgivable, to think it hurts this much, I absolutely won't forgive you! To apologize, let me make you happy, allow me to do it, even if you say no I'll still do it, you damn butthole bastaaaaard!"

Fear could not tell if he was angry, happy or in pain. There was no way to tell the difference. Watching his changing expression was causing dizziness while his tone of voice kept shifting as well. When Fear stepped forward, he pulled back again, placing the guitar case by his feet and swiftly picking up the camera hanging in front of his chest.

"I won't forget! Y-You... Fear-in-Cube has caused me this 'pain' that I absolutely won't forget! Heehaha~ Because this is precisely my driving force!"

The cursed camera—«The Paingrapher»—operated noisily. After Neto photographed the arm that Fear had just wounded, the injury turned into a photograph. Extracting the photo, Neto opened the guitar case by his feet.

"Don't think... you'll succeed..."

Prioritizing speed, Fear turned the virtual cube in her hand into the «Human-Perforator» while closing in, thrusting the weapon forward with all her might. But she was so close to succeeding. Neto kicked the guitar case, causing the bayonet inside to bounce out, which he then reached out and caught in his hand. The bayonet's blade blocked the drill before bouncing to the side.

"I've already prepared special ammunition just for you! Heehaha~!"

Rolling up the latest photo, Neto stuffed it into the magazine chamber. With that, the bayonet now carried the "pain" inflicted by Fear. Now all he needed to do was stab her with the blade or shoot her with a bullet of "pain" from the muzzle and she would suffer intense pain.

Fear could not help but track the bayonet with her gaze, but in the next instant, she felt a chill move rapidly along her spine. Retreating rapidly through instinct alone, she then saw that Neto was holding another bayonet in his other hand.

"Heehaw! You dodged it? Your instincts are quite sharp."

"Dual wielding...!?"

"What should I do about ammunition~? Hmm, I guess this will do. It hurts enough after all and I still have ammunition in stock to fire at will. That girl made lovely screams when I was taking these photos. I hope you can scream a couple times too."

Neto held one bayonet under his arm while using his freed hand to grab a whole stack of photos from the guitar case, stuffing them into his pocket. Then he drew one photo out to show her. Fear really regretted looking.

These cruel wounds were the same type as the ones she used to inflict as a tool of torture and execution. Although the face was out of the picture, it was clearly a girl's body. The wounds were horrific. Although the wounds themselves would disappear after being photographed, it would not be surprising if the victim went mad from the pain in the meantime. Since Fear

had already seen countless humans go mad from pain to this date, she knew very well.

Neto curled up the photo and stuffed it into the magazine chamber of the other bayonet that he had pulled out. Wielded one in each hand, both bayonets were armed with "pain." One carried the "pain" that Fear had caused Neto and would produce a particularly intense effect against her. The other carried an unknown girl's "pain."

"Ah~ I wonder how the battles on the other fronts are going? Oh my, progress must be slow for sure. That woman is that kind of typical butthole. Hence, I shall clarify beforehand. Heeheeha!"

"Clarify what?"

"The name of the weapons. «Wathe Breaker» does sound quite cool but it's too pretentious. On this point, my weapons' names are much more natural and cute. These fellas are like my limbs. You can also call them a part of my body. Tools indispensable for giving me pleasure, couldn't be friendlier! So, their names are—"

Neto raised the bayonets on his right and left respectively, one after the other, and said:

"This one is «Cock» while the other one is «Dick»! Heehahahahahee~!"

Fear frowned. Truly too vulgar. Both were slang for the male sexual organ.

In order to make this man shut up sooner, Fear tightly gripped her virtual cube while looking for an opportunity to attack. Neto suddenly stopped laughing and muttered with his head tilted:

"Hmm... Or is it the other way round? I've forgotten how to distinguish them!"

Part 12

"Haruaki-kun, stay there for now and don't move!"

Konoha ordered firmly. Because the enemies' fighting styles were unknown, it was better to play things safe.

Readying a knifehand strike, she charged into the enemy ranks. The knights attacked fiercely by swinging their sword, axe and spear

respectively. Although not fodder in level, they did not pose much of a threat either. Konoha parried using her bare hand.

In a battle against many, defeating the leader was the basic solution.

Rushing past the three knights' attacks, Konoha charged Lilyhowell head on. Instantly—

"—!?"

A strong gust of wind. Without any hesitation or fancy tricks, it was a horizontal slash powered by nothing except power and speed. As soon as Konoha entered the attack range of the greatsword, Lilyhowell instantly performed a slice. Naturally, Konoha was unable to counterattack. Not only that, but even evasion was impossible. While she used her hands, imbued with a blade's traits, to block, the entirety of the sword's great mass weighed down on her. Without absolutely no exaggeration, Konoha was blown away, flying into the air. However, she somersaulted in midair, stepped on the wall of the school building to ease her momentum, then landed with her numbed legs.

"Konoha!"

"I'm fine! I was just a little careless!"

Lilyhowell swung the greatsword along a massive arc, returning it to its original position. Her feet had hardly shifted at all.

"—I shall praise sincerely. That is truly a good sword."

"Of course. I have always maintained and sharpened it diligently."

"That's not what I meant... Whatever, I'll just add that the sword itself is excellent. Although apparently not cursed, it is a fine sword indeed."

"As a knight, I hope to pursue the right path. As one who exists to destroy Wathes, using Wathes as weapons should be the last resort. Hence, I do not use Wathes."

"Splendid. What I meant initially was that your swordsmanship is excellent. With neither hesitation nor malice, you simply swing your sword with extreme candor. Are you mistaken in what you ought to attack with your sword? What a shame."

"I shall not be deceived by your fancy words."

Lilyhowell held the «Wathe Breaker» in a stance on her side while staring at Konoha. The other three knights stood slightly in front of her, paying attention to Konoha's movements. Those three men aside, Lilyhowell presented absolutely no openings. She did not close in forcefully, instead approaching slowly, advancing centimeter by centimeter or even smaller increments. Although it sounded very contradictory, she was advancing by staying still. Lilyhowell was predominantly in a state of inaction, but by the time one noticed, she was already shrinking the separation.

—Amusing.

Konoha felt something tremble in the depths of her heart and decided to allow Lilyhowell to play with her again. Just as last time, she toyed with the three knights then invaded Lilyhowell's attack range again. As monitoring close with radar, the «Wathe Breaker» instantly shot out a straight flash of the blade. Just when Konoha saw through the opponent's movements, the enemy used the orthodox sword's power to counter as though saying "So what?" She was like a baseball player who only pitched fastballs at 170 kilometers per hour.

Konoha dodged the first strike but the second swiftly followed, leaving her no choice but to block it and getting blown back like the last time. Not bad, she praised Lilyhowell in her thoughts. The opponent was a pure swordswoman. No fancy tricks, just plain strength. Konoha imagined the joy of defeating her. Those three fodder became a hindrance. Step aside. No, there's no need to step aside. I'll kill you all first before slowly dealing with that swordswoman—

(...I... must... calm down... quickly!)

Konoha mustered all her strength to suppress the wavering in her heart. Not bad—Now was not the time to be making such comments. That was not the kind of comment she made. The danger unleashed during the battle against Hinai Elsie, the desire to see fresh blood, the danger of the cracks in her sanity that had yet to mend—want to see blood, want to see blood, to make my heart pound nonstop... No no want to murder no! Hurry and suppress it. Hurry and suppress the curse that had not been lifted at all!

Haruaki rushed towards Konoha. She had not revealed her true colors. She must not reveal her true colors. She absolutely had to conceal to the very end.

"Hoo... That person is very strong."

"Don't force yourself. Since you're chopping with your hand, your attacks are short-ranged and light. Not only are you outnumbered but that woman's attack range is far and she can rely on weight to pressure you. All of these are disadvantageous factors."

Token excuses. Haruaki had a point, but to her, these were merely token excuses.

"It's probably better if you turn back into a Japanese sword. Perhaps we can use the Sword-Kill Counter to destroy that «Wathe Breaker». Let me help too."

"Okay... This also... cannot be helped."

Konoha held his hand. So warm. Simply by touching him, a blissful feeling was spreading inside her.

Ahhh, she absolutely did not want to be devoured by her curse when in front of him. As long as she touched him, she was never going to forget this resolve, to be more intensely aware. Currently, that was what she needed greatly.

Hence, Konoha chose to turn back into the Japanese sword that allowed her to hold hands with him continuously.

To be frank, the difficulty of the battle was completely irrelevant. Indeed, those were all token excuses.

Her true feelings, indeed—there was only one, she simply relied on him.

"Please... Don't let go of me..."

"Of course."

He had not understood the true meaning behind Konoha's words. Nevertheless, his answer was extremely important.

Konoha transformed back into a sword. The feeling of clothes sliding off her body. The feeling of being surrounded by his palm. Becoming one with him. He had entered her body to merge with her. What a nice feeling, so warm. Will there come a day eventually when she could become one with him like now, but not in her Japanese sword form?

The three knights attacked. Controlling Haruaki's body, Konoha deflected all the weapons. She could feel a sense of dissonance, but still, she saw through the movements of the first person's sword, the second person's axe and the third person's spear.

Haruaki's breathing and her own breathing were mixed together, resulting in a type of simultaneous joy. She stopped his steps. Seeing this as an opportunity, the three knights swung their weapons simultaneously. However, she had already seen through everything.

"Sword-Kill Counter!"

Three pieces of steel were instantly shattered, dead. Immediately, the scabbard of black iron struck the knights' bodies. They collapsed to the ground, disarmed and in pain. Probably suffering fractures, but with their lives intact, they should count their blessings already.

"So, taking of the fodder is all fine and good, but..."

"Indeed, what are you scheming...?"

Konoha looked towards the source where her sense of dissonance was coming from.

Lilyhowell remained completely still. Ever since Konoha turned into a sword, Lilyhowell had not taken a single step, unlike the attacking knights. The way she held the distinctively shaped greatsword, the «Wathe Breaker», was also different from before, turning into a stance that seemed about to sweep her own body into it.

"Clearly your subordinates were attacking with such vigor, so what happened to the boss? They'll be disillusioned with you."

"They all know how I do things, so there is no disillusionment."

Lilyhowell's sincere eyes did not show any wavering. However, staring each other in the eye did not help.

Konoha cautiously closed in. Now that she had returned to her true form as a sword, both sides were almost equal in reach. Konoha waited for the very instant when the critical point was breached to perform a thrust, switching from stillness to motion. In concert with Konoha's attack, Lilyhowell also swung the «Wathe Breaker». However—

(—This is wrong!)

Konoha trembled, frantically halting the attack and retreating backwards. Haruaki gazed down at her in puzzlement.

"Konoha, what's wrong?"

"I... see... So that's what's going on?"

Lilyhowell withdrew the step she had taken, resuming a stance identical to just now, standing there like a knight statue.

"What's going on? I don't get it at all."

"In this regard, that person is the same as me right now."

Konoha was focusing her attention on the enemy's attack range, speed and power—while also committing her mind towards the enemy's reaction towards her own attack.

"Currently, that person will only counterattack. And her target is me, the sword itself. She intends to use the power in my attack to break me."

"So what you mean is...?"

"Of course, that sword is not slim or agile like me. She is counterattacking with all her strength by using the greatsword's shape and mass. Accuracy may not be high... But it's dangerous."

"Hence its name, the «Wathe Breaker». We exist to destroy Wathes, so destroying the Wathes is good enough. There is no need to harm the Wathes' owners to begin with. Consequently, Yachi Haruaki, I can promise you. I will not harm you."

"Oh my, how noble-minded. If you were not lying, I would really like to say thank you."

Konoha grumbled sarcastically. An excessively straightforward enemy turned out to be unexpectedly troublesome.

"Konoha, this is bad, right? Maybe you should turn back into human form..."

"Then the situation will just go back to the previous disadvantages when I was repelled by the enemy's attack range and weight. Right now, we are equal, so this is how we must continue."

In the current situation, both sides were looking for an opportunity to counterattack. Konoha cautiously closed in and stopped just before entering attack range.

Using the Sword-Kill Counter required the enemy to attack, but if the enemy did not attack, she would be in a dilemma. All she could do was counterattack after waiting for the opponent's counterattack. But she still had not fully collected the necessary information to perform the Sword-Kill Counter. Speed, angle, mass, habits, all such details could only be gathered gradually.

While carefully preventing her own blade from getting shattered, she had to set up the opponent's blade to be shattered.

Konoha thrust the blade forward as bait. The «Wathe Breaker» reacted. She did not intend for the attack to contact Lilyhowell's body in the first place. Letting the blade tips clash, Konoha swiftly withdrew and bided her time again.

This looked like they had entered stalemate. However, it was not a complete stalemate. Very slowly, Konoha was collecting information. Conversely, her concentration was slowly getting consumed.

Ultimately, the battle was going to be decided, an ending shall arrive.

Whether the opponent's sword or herself as the Japanese sword, one of them shall break—This kind of ending.

Impatience and anxiety were one's bane. Concentration must absolutely not be interrupted. The side lacking in composure shall lose. This was a battle of such high tension.

But was she composed?

Konoha suppressed this question that surfaced in her mind, feeling this pressure that would probably cause her human form to break out in cold sweat nonstop, at the same time moving the tip of her blade continuously.

Part 13

Fear judged the range of the enemy's shot to be fifty centimeters or so. For close quarters combat, this distance was surprisingly far. A long projectile range also meant an advantage for the enemy. Also—

"Heehaha~! Take this take this!"

Neto kept thrusting the bayonets from the right and the left repeatedly. Fear dodged the one on the right and used «A Hatchet of Lingchi» to block the left one. Due to her habits to this date, her consciousness would stop her body from moving for an instant after defending successfully.

But only in a battle against this man was her defense completely circumvented.

"Let's go, Dick!"

Neto pressed the trigger while the left bayonet was being pushed down by the hatchet. Instantly, Fear felt "pain" in her thigh that was in front of the muzzle, as though a knife had deeply penetrated her.

"Guahhh... Ahhh!"

"It's because I'm firing pain itself. As long as you stay in range, defense is pointless. Totally like a loose butthole! Heehahaha!"

While Fear stumbled, the other bayonet flew across her shoulder. Fear barely evaded it but she still felt intense pain from her shoulder. The agony made her speechless. Her vision blinked on and off. Her consciousness was about to short circuit. This was the backlash from the "pain" she had caused Neto. Simply brushing past her shoulder and it was already several times more painful than getting shot in the leg just now. Due to getting shot a number of times in the current battle, she knew that the fictional pain on her leg would dissipate over time, but not immediately. But what about the pain from the shoulder that was actually wounded? Will it disappear? Or will it last until the wound healed? Fear did not know.

"Gotcha gotcha! Oho~ Coming, coming, I feel it! I knew that returning pain to people feels the best! Let me stab you a few more times. Then I'll raise this Cock and give you a vicious blow! Yes, anyway, lemme reload Dick first for now."

Neto took out another abuse photo from his pocket and reloaded the bayonet he had just fired. There was no signs of running out of ammunition—He must have made prior preparations in anticipation of this battle. Fear could not help but sympathize with the girl who served as the source of these bullets.

Like a virulent pathogen, pain was invading her entire body. The returned pain from the bayonet blade was many times more intense than that caused by the unknown girl and did not disappear. In this regard, it was like a curse. A branded curse of unending pain. Fear really felt like rolling on the ground and screaming. This was electrical stimulation that entangled the nerves directly, devouring them completely. The switch of her consciousness was endlessly flicking on and off instantaneously.

However, she did not allow her consciousness to switch off. Fear pushed her stumbling footsteps, closing in and swinging «A Hatchet of Lingchi» vertically down. Neto crossed his pair of bayonets to block Fear's hatchet. A playful personality, tone of voice and weapon—Nevertheless, Fear could not deny that this man was very strong.

The hatchet and the bayonets pushed and opposed each other. But in terms of quality, hers was slightly superior. Using her full strength to apply pressure, Fear slowly pushed the bayonets down. Just a little more. Just a little bit more—

"What a toughie! I guess this is what happens in a contest of strength! But is this really okay?"

"What... are you talking about...!?"

"Heehee~ Just a little more and your hatchet will chop my neck open! That will surely hurt, hurting so much I'll almost die! If that pain is returned to you, whaddya think is gonna happen? You're willing to give me ammunition specialized for you, so that I can load Dick up as well? Why thank you very much~!"

Fear could not help but reflexively relax her force. Neto must have been aiming for this and took the opportunity to kick her belly. Due to the returned pain from just now that was still traveling all over her body, Fear was unable to muster strength in her legs and fell over, sitting on the ground. Looking up frantically, she saw Neto attacking, pressing on the advantage. The situation was too unfavorable. Pain hindered her thoughts. Hurry and pull back, regroup. Hurry and buy some time. For this purpose, Fear thought to herself, anything will do, just turn into a form that could stop him—

"Mechanism No.12 extinction type, revolving blade form: «Tornado of Souls»...!"

Fear was shocked. The order to transform did not transmit. Blown away just now, fallen slightly further ahead, the hatchet remained a hatchet. No good, that form had already been sealed away! Indeed, her thoughts had grown sluggish from the pain. Fear cursed her own stupidity and the inconvenience of the seal while desperately pulling on the chain of cubes to retrieve the hatchet. She had wasted time already and had no opportunity to dodge Neto's attack.

The gun containing the pain she had caused was that «Cock» in that guy's right hand. Simply by brushing across her shoulder just now, the pain was already unbearable... Lingering in her body like a curse, she could still feel it. That alone must absolutely be evaded. She could still grit her teeth and bear a certain person's pain sealed in the «Dick» on the left. Prioritize defending against the right bayonet. If possible, destroy it. The left was a necessary sacrifice.

"I'll use your pain to deliver a final blow to you! Remember to tighten your butthole when receiving it!"

Fear focused all her attention on the bayonet in Neto's right hand. As Neto swung the bayonet down—

"Mechanism No.8 crushing type, circular form: «Breaking Wheel of Francia»—Curse Calling!"

She instantly transformed the hatchet to the torture wheel, blocking with the axle and trying to snap the bayonet. Is it doable? Yes. Hurry. She could see Neto lifting his left hand's «Dick» to stab her. This perfect opportunity must not be wasted. Endure it. As long as she broke the bayonet on the right side while enduring the attack, she was going to have spare strength to handle him—

Stab! The bayonet's blade penetrated her upper arm. Instantly, a despairing sense of dissonance swept over her limbs and body.

"Guh... A-Ahh... Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

"Heeheeha~ Ha! I knew that's the kind of wishful thinking you'd have, what a dumb butthole! What~ A~ Shame~ This bayonet is the real «Cock»! No wait, maybe I really got them reversed!"

Neto kept pushing the blade's tip into her arm. It turned out that he had already exchanged his left and right weapons during the instant when Fear was sent flying away. This pain was causing Fear to feel as though her

entire body was dismembered. She could feel the circuits in her brain gradually burning out. A voice was whispering to her: just lose consciousness and you'll be free of everything. Stop screwing around! But it's breaking, it's shattering, it's leaking, it's overflowing, so painful painful painful, PAIN. FUL!

"Ooooooooh, what a thrill, this is really the best, penetration is the best! Raping buttholes is truly the best! Heehaw, I originally wanted to play with you longer to make you climax slowly, but I guess I don't have much time left! Sorry, let me climax first, fire——!"

Fear could see Neto put his finger on the trigger. Simply getting stabbed by the bayonet's blade was already overwhelming her with pain. If she were to be struck directly by the "pain" photo, she really did not want to imagine the consequences. Perhaps she really would go mad instantly.

"Gah... A-Ahhh—«A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes»!"

Everything would be meaningless if she lost and died here. Fear mustered all her strength to transform the torture wheel to the execution stake. Rather than skewering the enemy, she used its length to push herself away from him. Doing this was her limit at such close range.

The bayonet stabbed into her arm was finally shaking off. However, the pain did not subside. Her body was almost torn apart by pain, convulsing and twitching. Neto stopped his finger at the last moment and did not waste his bullet.

"Come on, I say, it's useless even if you endure it. Stop struggling. Give up and relax your butthole. I'm coming, heehahaha!"

Neto slowly closed in again. Fear's body was dominated by even more intense pain than before. She could not move. Neither could she order her body to move. She could feel the nerves all over her body breaking one by one.

(Oh... no...!)

Neto did not stop walking. Fear had no way of stopping him.

Desperately, she forced her consciousness to stay in her mind instead of slipping into darkness the moment she lowered her guard.

At the same time, she could do nothing but watch as the sadist slowly approached her.

Part 14

This was a play written by a foreign author in the past, one that no one could fail to recognize.

There was no script. Only one of the scenes was picked out.

There was not a single prop on stage. Only a common stage that could be found in any gymnasium.

There was no magnificent lighting. Only a circle of light from an amateur spotlight.

There were no requisite actors. Only—

Her alone.

This was enough.

A script existed, the destiny ahead of her, illustrated in everyone's heart.

Stage props existed. As long as she acted out a graveyard, it was a graveyard; as long as she acted out a castle, it was a castle.

Magnificent lighting existed. Her entire body seemed to be enveloped in color of infinite variety.

Hence, by the time she realized, Hayakawa Chihaya found her face already covered in tears.

On stage, she was acting a scene from that play, simply through one person's efforts alone.

Everyone focused their eyes on her, forgetting language, gazing into that world.

Three short minutes, then the end arrived.

Until she retreated back to the side of the stage, the world still remained immersed in the afterglow of the performance. After spending quite some time, the world finally returned to its mundane and ordinary state. Only then did everyone realize in surprise that the world centered around her had already ended.

As though pleading for more, the applause persisted without abating.

Chihaya wiped her face. Although Chihaya was more or less curious what she might say when she returned and saw her face, the sense of embarrassment won over curiosity. At this moment, Chihaya suddenly noticed Isuzu standing next to her, frowning... It looked like something was wrong.

"What's wrong? Did something happen to them? Could it be... Like... Someone got killed..."

"No. But—It could be considered quite a predicament. The situation is very dangerous."

Isuzu quietly described the situation. Hearing that, Chihaya said:

"...Say, you guys."

Chihaya sighed. Why had they not discovered this? No, perhaps this was something impossible to discover unless viewed holistically from afar—That said, this was clearly an important factor that could not be more obvious.

"Anyway, just do as I said for now. I never expected to actually say these words in real life. You guys... Are you stupid? Do you want to die?"

Part 15

Inhale, exhale, this duration of stillness continued to grate upon the nerves. The battle against Lilyhowell was like a military exercise.

But the battle suddenly reached an end.

Lilyhowell's «Wathe Breaker» was not crushed. Naturally, neither was Konoha crushed.

Haruaki watched in shock at the scene. An action so sudden that it caught him unprepared.

A shrine maiden picked up the trunk that was fallen on the floor, brought by the knights. Then she made a mad dash, running as fast as she could. Naturally, this was the kagura bell who had led Haruaki and Konoha to this place. Until now, she had been observing from afar to avoid getting in their way. Did something happen?

"What...!?"

Catching sight of this from the corner of her eye, Lilyhowell turned around in surprise. Konoha did not let go of this chance and had Haruaki step forward, but Lilyhowell's judgment was extremely fast. Stepping forward, she rolled several times along the ground to create distance, interrupting the weapon-breaking duel between Konoha and her. Then she muttered:

"Since only Muramasa is here, that means the other teams are under attack as well. I do not think Neto will be defeated but—It will be troublesome if that is lost. This forces my hand!"

Carrying the «Wathe Breaker» on her shoulder, she rapidly chased the shrine maiden.

"I don't get what happened... But anyway, Konoha, let's give chase!"

Holding Konoha, Haruaki began to run as well. With some difficulty, he finally caught up to see the shrine maiden's back as well as Lilyhowell pursuing closely after her. Despite wearing armor, she was surprising fleet of foot. Passing between the school buildings, running across the courtyard, then—

"Fear!"

"That child...! It's all because she was overconfident and acted alone...!"

They reached the end of the sports ground. Fear was supporting herself with one hand against the ground, panting, apparently unable to move her body. There were wounds on her shoulder and arm where a vivid color was dripping.

The black man, Neto, was standing in front of Fear, a bayonet in each hand. At this moment, he stopped walking towards Fear and turned his head to look at Haruaki and the others.

"Heeheeha, what's up? Looks like you're getting raped in the butthole by the others."

"Hmm—I now see that the theft was undertaken in an attempt to rescue Fear-in-Cube from her crisis. If I have no choice but to chase the trunk, they would have no choice but to chase me. This was the aim."

"Hmph. Then what do we do?"

"If only two trunks were stolen, it matters not. The trunk by your feet is still safe. They were probably unable to make a move because it is too close to

you... The other two teams are also carrying trunks so there is no need to worry."

"Understood. Then I'll continue with my job. In the end, it's just increasing the audience."

The kagura bell watching over Fear had cooperated with her fellow bells to save Fear from the crisis, leading Haruaki and Konoha to this place. Her course of action was clearly very appropriate, possibly suggested by Chihaya or someone else. Haruaki felt very grateful. She had done the right thing. However—

"Fear! Wait there, we're going to save you now!"

"Do you really think I will let you go?"

Whether or not they were able to rescue Fear from the crisis was a separate matter.

Just as Haruaki tried to rush towards Fear, Lilyhowell blocked his way. Haruaki silently tried to circle around her but the «Wathe Breaker» swept horizontally. Konoha counterattacked, parrying the extremely heavy greatsword, but Haruaki had no choice but to stop running.

"I remember that being called the Sword-Kill Counter. This probably isn't a technique that can be performed while on the move. One, to save Fear-in-Cube, you must first defeat me. Two, but in order to defeat me, you must stop moving. In light of that, I offer you this advice—Give up."

"Stop saying... Rubbish...!"

Haruaki gripped Konoha hard. Fear was still unable to stand, her face twisted in pain, panting, trying to support herself with the execution stake, moving very slowly.

"Guuh... Ahhh... Hahhhh... Damn it! The pain... no signs of... subsiding at all... Urghh... Ahhhhhh!"

"Hee~ Ha~! That goes without saying. This is my greatest trait so of course I'm literally 'avenging' myself! I only got this nickname because of this ability to 'return pain'—Hmm, bluntly stated, this is like a super move. It's meaningless if it'll go away easily. After hurting me, you already lost the moment I returned that pain to you! Next, I'll just have to bring you to climax then my vengeance is done! Heehee~ Hahaha!"

Neto twirled the bayonets in his hands while walking forward, looking as though he enjoyed Fear's pain.

Every time Haruaki took a step forward, Lilyhowell also took a step in turn.

Haruaki wanted to rush forward with reckless abandon but then he suddenly remembered that Lilyhowell's target was not himself but Konoha. Lilyhowell could very well be waiting for him to deliver a reckless strike in an attempt to force her away.

(Damn it...!)

Haruaki looked around. Nothing? Was there no way to break out of this crisis?

Then—

In the next instant, leaping into his view was—

Part 16

Zenon and Ganon were stuck in a desperate battle.

None of the enemy knights possessed special weapons or tools. But overall, this team seemed to have gathered the relatively more capable members. They were protecting the trunk carefully, most likely something very important. The shrine maiden watching from the sidelines attempted to take certain actions but appeared to give up in the end.

Zenon dodged the enemy's attacks while throwing knives. Ganon also brandished her sword languidly to engage in battle, biding her time.

"Ooh~ So tiring, honestly, this can be considered a one-sided defensive battle, isn't it~?"

"We have completely accomplished our goal of halting the opponents' advance. Hence this is considered an attack in this sense."

"Oh my~ I've said it every time already, but my body really has gone slow and out of shape... Especially in stamina~ Dear sister, is there anything nearby like those recovery items in games?"

Instantly, Zenon was at a loss for words. This was not because she started doubting the mental state of the elder sister who could still utter such nonsense in this sort of crisis. That was not the entire reason at least.

Instead, it was because something that she wanted was indeed present. For some unknown reason, it had emerged in their view.

But Zenon continued to ponder the meaning behind it—the significance of that object's appearance—at the same time, she wondered: Onee-sama would very likely open her mouth wide and pounce on it.

On a nearby tree, in a gap between the flourishing leaves—A hand was extended, holding a meat bun.

What did this mean?

"..."

Zenon threw a knife without saying a word, striking the meat bun's very center.

"Ahhh! Is that the item for recovering all HP?"

Zenon ignored her sister's shrieking. The meat bun, stabbed with a knife—Carrying the meat bun, a dark-skinned girl leapt down from the tree with the rustling of leaves.

A glazed over expression, eyes without any fluctuation in emotion. Zenon knew very well that her own eyes were the same. Two faces of similar demeanor looked at each other. The girl remained expressionless and spoke monotonously:

"I mutter to myself: giving this alarming report. Completely unrelated to the surrounding situation, I was just lying in a tree trying to eat lunch while taking a nap but my precious meat bun was attacked. Now I must avenge the meat bun to vent my personal anger. You there, do you know what rude person attacked this meat bun? I ask this kind of question."

Zenon immediately pointed to the side and answered. Even though she was holding a throwing knife identical to the one stuck on the meat bun.

"I do. The suspicious men over there."

"I declare: giving grateful thanks to your information provided. Then out of personal resentment, to vent personal anger, I have decided personally to defeat this group of men and their accomplices. This is purely based on personal resentment for attacking the meat bun, completely unrelated to organizations such as the Lab Chief's Nation or the Knights' Dominion."

Drawing the throwing knife from the meat bun, the girl casually dropped it by Zenon's feet.

Then she took out handcuffs from her pocket and cuffed her hands. Bending her legs, she drew a knife from under her skirt. Finally, she tossed into her mouth the meat bun with the large hole in it.

Once she finished chewing, the number of knights remaining standing was reduced to three within the blink of an eye.

"—Mode: «Cycling Yahoo Masayori»!"

"This move... How is... it...!?"

Kuroe had used her hair to entangle a bicycle in the parking lot to smash against one of the knights. At the same time, Kirika was using the «Tragic Black River» to restrain another knight by the waist. Then using the parking lot's roof as a pulley, she pulled the knight up, allowing him to crash into the ground after gathering sufficient gravitational potential energy.

With that, there were no mobile enemies left for now. The other two knights were already immobilized. The third person wrapped under layers of hair to resemble a caterpillar while the last man had fainted from lack of oxygen after he was choked by the neck. After confirming that all knights were immobilized, Kirika breathed a great sigh of relief. The usual sense of unpleasant pain was present on her chest, calves and shoulder blades. The sensation of pain and the squirming of regenerating flesh. As expected, she was unable to eliminate all the enemies without coming to harm herself. Kuroe jogged over to Kirika.

"Kiririn, are you okay? Do you need me to wrap your wounds with hair?"

"No, I'll heal immediately so don't worry... Anyway, the enemies are dealt with."

"Yeah. It took quite some time but I absolutely won't let anyone call us lacking in power again. Since we worked so hard, we must demand rewards from Haru. I'll be in charge of asking so you must make effective use of this opportunity, Kiririn!"

"A-Absolutely ridiculous... No, it's pointless to hide it from you. Then I'll say thanks in advance."

Kirika spoke with a wry smile, causing Kuroe to widen her eyes for an instant before smiling.

"This honesty is really great~ Ah, while I'm praising your honesty, Kiririn, I've also decided to name your move from just now as «Sure Kill: Kirika Itsuna Drop», please use it! Next time you perform the move, I hope you'll yell it out as loud as you can!"

"Sorry, I don't think I can comply. By the way, she has been gesturing for a while already."

Kirika looked over at the kagura bell shrine maiden and recalled. She had apparently been waving her hands all this time. Then something on the ground leapt into view and Kirika finally understood.

"Oh—The trunk? You wanted us to steal it, or you were planning to steal it, hoping we could distract them? Sorry, we noticed too late. Because their defense was a bit difficult to crack, even after I noticed, I didn't know if I could act on it immediately."

The shrine maiden shook her head as though saying "Don't mind that." Seeing this, Kuroe said:

"Hmm. In other words, using the nickname I just decided to call you girls, Suzu-chan, you girls were trying to use this trunk as the key to some kind of operation... And looks like this operation is still underway."

The shrine maiden picked up the trunk that was previously in the possession of the knight who had just collapsed, staring intently at Kirika and Kuroe. It felt like she was saying: Please hurry.

"I don't quite understand, but she wants us to follow her, right? Looks like we'd better hurry."

While Kirika was murmuring, the shrine maiden had already turned around and started running. Kirika and Kuroe prepared to chase her.

But after running a few steps, the shrine maiden suddenly stopped and looked back abruptly.

Her face was filled with a shocked expression while her eyes seemed to be staring at a location somewhere else. Her body trembled slightly. Perhaps losing strength, the trunk slid from her palm and fell on the ground. Not only that, but she also stumbled, instantly collapsing to sit on the floor—

"Hey, what's with you?"

Kirika ran over to examine the shrine maiden's face. This inability to speak was causing such anxiety. However—

"You just need to answer yes or not. Did you foresee something?"

The shrine maiden slowly shook her head from side to side. The answer was no.

"...Your other comrades, did they tell you something has happened?"

The shrine maiden slowly moved her head up and down. Yes.

The shock she suffered was nothing ordinary. Something very serious must have happened—Kirika concluded. It did not happen here. Through their shared consciousness, one of them had seen something. What was it?

There were countless answers that could be filled in this blank. Precisely because of that, Kirika wished to obtain a minimum level of relief.

Hence, praying for a negative answer, trying to first rule out this worst possible outcome, she asked:

"Someone—did someone die?"

The shrine maiden's head moved up and down. It was no illusion. Kirika was not mistaken.

No matter how much she wished she were mistaken.

Part 17

"Th-Thank you for your hard work. Umm... I was thinking you might have sweated a lot, this tote-..."

"Shiraho, thank you for your hard work~! Your performance was wonderful! Here, a towel!"

"...Nothing."

Chihaya came up to welcome Shiraho returning from the stage. Due to encountering the maid who was waiting for Shiraho at the same time,

Chihaya hastily returned the towel to her pocket. The maid tilted her head and made a look as though saying "Oh?" while looking at Chihaya, but Chihaya pretended not to see.

"Goodness gracious, that was so exhausting. Having been so long since I last put on performance, I really couldn't get my voice out."

"R-Really...? Hmm~ Shiraho, you were really amazing~ Once again, thank you for your hard work!"

"Phew~ However, it hasn't ended yet... To think there is a speech segment as well. What exactly should I say?"

"Shiraho, you'll be greatly received no matter what you say! Like talking about that leg beautifying exercise you do right after a bath, that would be nice, right? Everyone will definitely be very interested!"

Putting aside whether it would help in the beauty pageant, everyone was definitely going to be very interested. Chihaya really felt like asking about the details privately afterwards.

Just at this time, holding the towel to wipe her sweat, Shiraho turned lightly towards Chihaya, tilting her head slightly and said:

"Actually, I don't care."

"W-What?"

"In other words, where did that tall girl go? Did she feel that nothing mattered anymore because the noisy silver-haired lass was gone? Given this rare occasion when I'm acting on stage, yet she doesn't even watch? It's as though she's saying that I am inferior to the silver-haired lass. My feelings are hurt to some extent."

Part 18

The person leaping into Haruaki's view...

Was neither Kirika nor Kuroe, neither Zenon nor Ganon, and definitely not Un Izoey or a knight.

It was Yume.

Stepping forward to place herself between Fear and Neto, she glared sharply at Neto. Held in her hand was a wooden mop that was probably taken from a cleaning equipment cupboard somewhere.

"W-What...!? A-Are you an idiot? This has nothing to do with you, don't get involved... Guh... Urghhh!"

The pain spreading through her body was making Fear moan. Yume looked over her shoulder at Fear and smiled.

"No... Indeed, it's still impossible. Because I truly love you explosively, Fear-senpai! Yes, so in the end, I can't stand by and do nothing about your crisis!"

"This... is not... a game!"

"Of course I know that! Because I also know that the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion is a terrifying organization!"

Haruaki's group was instantly rendered speechless by the implications of the term she uttered. Basically—

Yume glared firmly at Neto and swung the mop in her hand lightly, entering a stance.

"I—I am a member of the Draconians! So I will never run away!"

Hearing her self-introduction, Neto frowned even more at the intruder who had forced him to stop. Blocking in front of Haruaki, Lilyhowell simply glanced sideways at Yume without revealing any openings.

Fear stared wide-eyed in shock, slowly lifting herself using the execution stake, asking at the same time:

"What... did you... say? So, y-you... infiltrated the school—"

"Yes, I infiltrated the school."

"On the message board, chatting with me on all topics..."

"Yes, I love eating hamburgers! This is the all-purpose food that allows me to eat grains, meat and vegetables all at the same time! Because I'm very weak, my parents died, leaving me all alone. After eating this secret food of hamburgers for the first time, my height grew rapidly as a result. Oh, the tip about sleeping in Ancient Japanese class without getting scolded is really

great! I basically treat it as my chance to catch up on sleep and greatly look forward to that class!"

She answered all questions in the affirmative, leading to the only true identity possible.

Infiltrating the school, the unidentified member of the Draconians. The one whom Fear had been keeping contact with on the message board. The one whom Fear wanted to meet but chose to protect silently without meeting her. The one whom Fear wished to support in her wish to become an "ordinary high school student."

Who was that? The answer was obvious.

Nirushaaki. «Knight Killer». «Battle Demon». Formerly ranked second of the Draconians.

Currently, she was standing before the immobilized Fear, facing off against Neto the Avenger, glaring at each other, substituting for Haruaki and Konoha whose movements were pinned down by Lilyhowell.

There was no choice but to depend on her. No, given who she was, depending on her would surely be fine—

"—Not right."

"Eh?"

The sword in Haruaki's hand suddenly whispered. Haruaki noticed at the same time while asking in turn. He saw something unbelievable. Yume holding the broom, a light smile hanging on her face. However—

But her legs seemed to be trembling, were his eyes deceiving him—?

In the next instant, something began while something else concluded at the same time.

"Huh...? This is so not funny. No. It's totally wrong. This bitch... Ah, so not funny!"

Without giving Yume any chance to react, Neto stepped forward, raised his bayonet and pierced her abdomen.

Honestly, what a headache—Shiraho thought to herself.

The contestants were lined up in a row on stage. Naturally, she was standing next to girls dressed in club uniforms and other outfits. Currently, everyone had to take their turn and give a speech about their thoughts. Each person was given two minutes.

"Okay, next up is... Sakuramairi Shiraho-san who just treated us to a spectacular, improvised drama performance!"

In concert with the host's voice, the contestant who had given the previous speech handed the microphone over to her. Shiraho took the mic, still not knowing what she was going to say. Packed tightly below the stage, the students were gazing at her with inexplicable anticipation. She had gone overboard. If she could simply say "no comment" at this time, how easy that would be.

Shiraho shifted her gaze and saw Sovereignty at the standby area. She had her fist tightly clenched before her chest, looking up at Shiraho with nervousness and anticipation. Chihaya was also standing next to Sovereignty, and for some reason, her expression was identical to Sovereignty's.

This event was held for the sake of people like Chihaya in the first place. This event was held for the sake of welcoming the new students. Shiraho recalled this fact. Hence, she took a breath and started speaking:

"First of all, allow me to say to all of you first-years—Congratulations for becoming students of our school."

Part 20

As though unsure what had happened to her, Yume's eyes were spinning out of control. Red blood spilled out of her mouth.

"Ah... Gi...?"

"Stop getting in the way of my pleasure, you amateur!"

Neto's bayonet was still stabbed in Yume's abdomen. He opened the magazine, pulled out the old photo inside and carefully put it away. Before stabbing Yume in the abdomen, he had fired a shot into the air to incinerate the previous photo inside before inserting this old photo. Judging

from the circumstances, that was likely the photo of the "pain" that Nirushaaki had caused him.

"Y-Yume——!?"

"What... Damn it... Damn it—! What... have... you done?!"

"What, you're asking me? Who asked her to come running out at this time? Anyone would think she's the butthole everyone has been searching for all this time. So not funny. She's totally not it. What the heck is up with this chick? A butthole on a totally amateur level. So freakin' weak. Whatever, all said and done, that bitch ain't this tall anyway. It's not like she could have grown tall between today and back then. Ah, what a bother, why the heck did you come, butthole!"

"Gah, hee... Ah... Uwahhhhh!"

Neto impatiently pulled the bayonet in and out. The genuine avenger mood was completely gone, replaced by the laughter of a crazed sadist. Yume's uniform was dyed another color. Konoha shook slightly as though enduring something.

"Guh... That child... isn't... Nirushaaki...?"

"Heehaw, you should scream in a more pleasant voice! Getting in the way just as things were getting fired up, at least service me a little here. Oh? Is that what a Japanese school girl looks like inside!?"

"Gihee... Ah, ah, ahhhhh..."

"—One, Draconian. Two, she blocked our way. That is all, there is insufficient reason for me to stop him."

Lilyhowell narrowed her eyes, simply turning her back to Yume's screams, muttering in a pained voice.

"Step aside!"

"Impossible."

Haruaki rushed forward. However, Konoha's movements were very sluggish. Using the «Wathe Breaker», Lilyhowell deflected Konoha effortlessly. Haruaki instantly remembered that Konoha could have been broken by the attack just now and could not help but shiver with terror. Then another scream from Yume made him shudder again. He must save

her. Although he had no idea what was going on and did not know who she actually was, he knew that he had to save her anyway. But Lilyhowell was excessively in the way!

Behind Lilyhowell, Neto could be seen releasing Yume finally. Treating her as an object, he kicked her body aside and pulled out the bayonet. Making a sound that was intermediate between a liquid and a solid, Yume's body collapsed in front of Fear.

"H-Hey... Yume... Yume, pull yourself together... a bit...!"

"—Fear... -senpai. Sorr...y. I was really... too reckless... I guess...?"

"Totally reckless to the extreme! Y-You... aren't Niru... shaaki...? In that case, how do you know about the message board? No, that doesn't matter right now—"

Fear's gaze wavered unsteadily as though she suddenly understood the unavoidable fate that was about to descend.

"This is also... Sorry. I don't like lying to the end, so I'll confess... Nirushaaki-sama... From the start... wasn't in this school. Inside this school... was only the one pretending to be her... making contact with you guys, Fear-senpai... according to orders... me, a little flunkie from the Draconians."

"But you don't have a tattoo on your body...!"

"Fufu. Although I was very impatient, but new members... can't get tattooed with Wounds... until their worth is recognized... I'm... just a failure of this level. So, if you ask me why I did all this... It's all part of the plan—The «Nest Parasitoid»."

"Plan...?"

"Yes... Ontenzaki-senpai was defeated... Kokoro-senpai was defeated... Even the very strong Hinai Elsie of legend was defeated by you guys. So the Draconians' Commander decided to have a young member learn what makes you and your friends 'strong,' Fear-senpai. He wanted me to understand what made you guys so strong then bring the reason back. By hanging around you guys... Watching battles—And this time, using news of Nirushaaki-sama as bait, summoning the Knights' Dominion to fight your faction to observe. Because our principle is... the process of becoming

strong does not matter, so long as one ended up strong... anything is acceptable... probably like, stealing techniques as much as possible..."

"So they... sent you... here...?"

Yume's head bobbed up and down as though shaking.

"I seriously believe... it's because I find Fear-senpai so cute... clearly so cute yet so strong, that's what I admire so much—that's why... I was chosen. I didn't... lie. I really love you, Fear-senpai... not because I was forced to love you. But because... from the start... I loved you very much..."

"E-Enough! I know!"

"That's right... I love you so much... because I love you too much... I ended up... failing. Clearly I could have just watched from the sidelines... even if... I didn't interfere... surely you'll make a comeback, Fear-senpai. But... I can't stop myself... I wanted... so much to protect you, Fear-senpai... I must protect her... despite being such a weak amateur... without knowing better, rushing... forward—"

Yume suddenly coughed and spat blood.

Then she half closed her eyes while desperately squeezing out a smile. How could you still smile? Incomprehensible. Seriously—Why?

However, Fear could no longer get an answer to this insignificant question.

"Okay... Let me... see... Senpai... The exhilarating... explosively amazing.. great comeback. I... wanted to see that kind of Fear-senpai... that's why I came here..."

Her smile froze at this point.

Her smile persisted, maintaining this smile.

"Ah—AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Fear gave a piercing scream.

Part 21

I suppose, this is like a new world, isn't it?

Some of you probably feel uneasy. If life has not gone smoothly so far, you will feel even more uneasy.

Same here—Frankly speaking, it used to be the same for me. I hated school very much in the past and felt very uneasy.

I suppose I still hate it for sure right now. After all, going to school every day is such a pain. It's so noisy no matter where I go. The lessons are so boring with content that goodness knows if it will ever come in handy.

But who knows why, that uneasiness gradually went away. Despite hating school just as much. Despite no change, if the result was refuted, then what meaning is there in the unease being considered right now?

Everyone, perhaps you may not understand what I am talking about, but don't mind it. Because, neither do I. I am simply speaking whatever is coming to mind.

However, there are certain things that you can only know by experiencing them personally. I have had many such experiences. For example, will one get tired of seeing the same person every day? Or chatting about the same topics every day?

...How should I explain?

The majority of things will turn out as imagined.

But unexpectedly, things also turned out slightly better than imagined.

I believe it will be the same for you all. If not—Oh right, first try recalling the person you love, how's that? Simply by doing so, your mood will surely improve. At least, no matter how sad you feel or when you feel you are about to die from sadness, you'll still be able to force out a smile to avoid worrying your beloved. With this, the one you love will end up smiling more, which is, of course, not a bad thing. But perhaps, this only applies to me, so I cannot provide a guarantee.

In any case, this is my message—Are two minutes up already?

So, allow me to repeat in the end.

Congratulations for enrolling.

I wish for everyone's future to turn out slightly more wonderful than imagined.

Part 22

Fear screamed with all her strength until she was hoarse.

Looking down, she could see the ground, she could see the girl's smiling face, she could see the bright red nearby, she could see something rolling on the ground. This probably fell from that girl's skirt. The toy cube. Rubik's cube.

Smiling, the girl had said that they were now a pair.

The two of them had tilted their heads together, simply swiveling the cubes, clicking nonstop.

Yesterday, they had spent all their time together, memorizing how to solve the Rubik's cube, practicing how to complete it quickly.

"Seriously, what a butthole... In the end, that's what happened? We were totally taken in by those Draconians. Nirushaaki isn't here at all?"

"If one were to believe that girl's words, this should be the conclusion."

Chatting could be heard from a distance. So noisy. I'm currently talking to Yume.

(It's all thanks to you that I was able to learn... how to solve the Rubik's cube—)

Using both hands, Fear cradled the Rubik's cube, all covered in blood.

Then slowly she swiveled it. The blue side with red on it. The white side with red on it. There was no need to rush right now. Fear simply wanted to show Yume that she was able to solve it perfectly, that Yume was the one who helped her learn this.

While her head was bowed, she could sense an approaching presence ahead.

"I'm seriously in no mood for heehaha laughing. What the heck—it ends up the same as before? A knight squad was already assembled, it's not like we can go back empty-handed. If we go back with the good news of destroying Fear-in-Cube as a souvenir, at least it'll retain some of the Dominion Lord's honor."

As though awakened by that annoying voice, Fear felt a wave of numbing, stinging pain.

The pain scurried over the depths of her body, forcing her to remember forgotten suffering.

But so what?

Click, click. Next comes this step! Up, right, up, right, up, right, right—It's like an incantation! Fear recalled Yume's voice. She could not possibly be forgotten.

"You're not listening at all. What a lost cause. So into playing with that toy. I never thought Fear-in-Cube would be so easily defeated. Clearly just a butthole Wathe. Whatever, while you're playing with a toy, allow me to make you into a toy too, heehaha!"

The colors gradually grew uniform. Click. Such inopportune pain. Stinging. She did not care.

Click, click, click, click... click.

(Ahhh—)

The beautiful cube was done.

The cube belonging to that girl and her.

"I'm gonna destroy you. Remember to scream enough to give me great pleasure in listening to it!"

At this moment, Fear finally looked up. Holding the solved Rubik's cube in both hands, she looked up. Before her eyes was Neto. He had raised his bayonet up high, preparing to stab her.

What should she do? Naturally, exactly what Yume had said. This was her wish. A explosively amazing, great comeback.

(For this... I need... power. So...)

Her body was in unbearable pain. Unable to move as usual. In particular, her legs could not move. Difficult to dodge or attack.

However, Fear did not think there was no way.

(So—Yume, please lend this to me for a while.)

Doable.

A voice whispered somewhere in her mind. You can do it. You can't possibly fail to do it.

The voice continued to whisper. Whispers that were not her own. Whispers that really seemed like she had heard them before.

—Curse—

—Your curse—

—Your curse... is infinite. Already so upon creation—

Hence, she can do it? Although she had no idea what it meant, she can do it. Memories from centuries ago that she had long forgotten. Forget the trivial stuff. Being able to do it was the most important. Knowing this alone was enough.

Fear looked up at the approaching bayonet.

While staying aware of what she was leaning on as a crutch, the existence that was already released as the execution stake...

While tightly gripping the Rubik's cube whose colors were all uniform, the one belonging to Yume—She spoke lightly at the same time:

"—Dual Emulation, start."

Part 23

Fear was activating two emulated cubes simultaneously.

Although this was the first time, what she needed to do remained the same. She generated the umbilical path—namely, the chain of cubes. Unlike the chain of cubes that always connected to her right hand, this chain was attached to her left. On the end of the chain was a black mass of steel, transformed from the Rubik's cube. The self that could not be more familiar. Before it fell to the ground in its cube state, Fear rapidly conferred upon it a new form.

"Mechanism No.30 blooming type, pointed form: «Flower Sword Verazella»!"

Fear used the slender sword to deflect Neto's bayonet. Instantly, she activated the flower sword's mechanism, opening the blade in a cross, spinning the sword behind her to block the other bayonet. The returned "pain" was still rushing through her limbs and body but she still managed to defend as long as her upper body could move. The problem was her lower body, her legs, mobility.

"What a butthole that never knows to give up! You think you can defeat me just by wielding weapons in both hands? Too naive!"

Deflection alone was unable to move out of attack range. Neto raised his bayonet again to stab her.

Fear barely managed to block using the «Flower Sword Verazella», opened in a cross shape. She was about to spin the blade but Neto saw through the action this time. Applying force, he resisted. Then Fear suddenly found the bayonet's muzzle aimed straight at her. Neto laughed maliciously then placed his finger on the trigger.



Even if she could not evade, evasion was the only choice. Currently, she was able to do it.

"Mechanism No.27 grinding type, cog-wheel form: «Gear Wheel Trismegistus»—Curse Calling!"

The execution stake she had been using as a crutch began to change in form.

The form appearing immediately was a pedestal with three large gear wheels connected vertically. Gears were supposed to be tools used as intermediate devices to make other objects turn, but in this form, that was not exactly their purpose. Gears must act as simple gears. Connected to one another, grating while drawing in human arms, legs and necks, never halting, using power to crush and sever these body parts between the gears. That was the kind of torture tool this was.

However, that was not Fear's current aim. She had summoned this mechanism in an upside-down state. Hence, the pedestal was on top while the gears that were supposed to be above the base were pressed against the ground instead.

Fear reached out with one hand and grabbed the top of the pedestal, hoisting herself onto it and ordering the gears to turn at the same time.

Then what happened next naturally required no explanation. Things in contact with gears would start moving. However, the gears could not move the ground they were currently touching. Hence, naturally, the gear mechanism itself would move like a mode of transportation.

The gears grated noisily as they scratched the surface of the ground, forcefully tracing out an arc while moving forward.

Meanwhile, Neto's finger pressed the trigger. Certain of striking his target, he fired bullets of "pain" simultaneously from both guns. Although they were invisible, Fear could feel the bullets' cursed presences fly past her hair behind her.

"W-What——!"

"—At the same time! Mechanism No.22 bludgeoning type, spike-ball form: «Morgenstern», Curse Calling!"

While using the gear mechanism to move herself forward, Fear transformed the flower sword in her left hand to a spiked metal club. Using

the momentum from being in motion, she swept the spiked metal club horizontally towards Neto's body. Of course, there was not the slightest hesitation in this series of movements.

Bones, flesh, blood and a little bit of machinery—

Countless noises could be heard while all of this was crushed, disintegrated and smashed into one.

Part 24

"A future slightly more wonderful than imagined—She... Did she manage to achieve it?"

"...Isuzu?"

Suddenly hearing whispers, Chihaya looked back. Isuzu was staring intently at Shiraho who had ended her speech on stage. Chihaya had never seen Isuzu's eyes looking like that, a gaze showing signs of deliberately suppressed emotions.

"No. For sure... yes. In order to achieve this kind of future... That was why she did it. Even if it meant going against orders, she felt that her wish of a 'slightly more wonderful future' would not arrive unless she stood in front of the one she wanted to protect—"

"Isuzu, what's the matter... Is this a prediction?"

On stage, the last person was about to deliver her speech. Chihaya's classmate, Kagidou Himeno, was just about to pick up the microphone. Chihaya decided it would be best to listen to her speech.

"No... Chihaya-sama. How do you feel about Yume-sama!?"

Why ask this weird question all of a sudden? Chihaya frowned but Isuzu looked very serious. Hence, Chihaya scratched her face.

"Well, basically, she's a classmate... Not only is she tall but she's also very annoying the way she moves and talks. And calling herself annoyingly cute, who does she think she is? But... Hmm, she's a... friend. That's all I can call her."

The conversation partner she met on the first day of school, at least... Not bad at all. A start to her high school life that turned out a little less boring

than imagined. Just as Shiraho described, it was surely the same for most people.

"I see... That's... true."

Isuzu narrowed her eyes, nodding neither slowly nor quickly. It was as though she were transmitting Chihaya's reply, her voice, somewhere. Chihaya suddenly felt very embarrassed. Change the subject!

"Oh right! Have you found the enemy who's supposed to have entered the school beauty pageant?"

"...No. What about you, Chihaya-sama~?"

"I gave up a long time ago. It's completely meaningless. Besides, I already knew who's gonna win."

"True... But... the enemy should have had a plan from the beginning. Although it's not particular meaningful anymore, no one wants the secrets hidden in their heart to be exposed."

"What are you talking about?"

Chihaya sniffed slightly while asking Isuzu. For some reason, drifting from somewhere, there seemed to be a very sweet fragrance of perfume entering her nostrils.

Isuzu tilted her head slightly and answered:

"In other words, the enemy's plan might still be going on right now perhaps. Although there is only a faint smell of a curse~ Anyway, I should be able to stop the enemy just by doing this, so please allow Isuzu to do so."

This time, it was Chihaya's turn to tilt her head in puzzlement. Isuzu's action was very simple.

"...Akin to strong winds from high mountains, capable of blowing away thick layers of clouds."

She simply murmured these words softly.

...Blowing a violent gale towards the stage.

Standing next to her, the incomparably formidable opponent was delivering her speech. Although the content was quite ordinary, or even described as fragmented, her voice carried unbelievable charisma.

She felt her sense of hearing getting captivated.

—Right, let me try to recall the person I love—

Laurica's mind reflexively recalled the image of a certain person she idolized, Lilyhowell Kilmister.

Laurica whispered to Lilyhowell in her heart. This opponent is very strong. But I won't lose. In order to reach where you are, in order to be with you. In order to be more than just "Trash."

However, the few seconds spent on thinking turned out to be a fatal waste.

"What's the matter? It's finally your turn."

Beside her—Sakuramairi Shiraho—was handing the microphone towards Laurica, tilting her head. Crap. Now was not the time for spacing out. Laurica used her fingers to turn and remove the lid of the small bottle behind her. The «Perfume of Mating Season» of which little remained—The Wathes she was going to deplete completely here to force the opposite sex into heat. Laurica reversed the bottle behind her at her waist, pouring out all the perfume. A sweet fragrance. The contestants sniffed. No need to care about the same sex. Her target consisted of the boys who smelled this fragrance.

Essentially all Wathes possessed the trait of maximizing the number of victims on its own. The fragrance of ordinary perfume probably could not spread in this manner even if one were to pour a bottle out completely. However, this perfume would automatically spread throughout the entire gym, seeking the males it was meant to control. That said, judging from the current situation, the space was far too vast and the targets too numerous. It was still uncertain whether they were going to be bewitched immediately by the user—Laurica—simply by smelling it. Hence, while the fragrance was spreading, it was also necessary to speak at the same time in order to deliver to the boys' consciousness the message that "the owner of this fragrance is me."

Laurica took the microphone. No problem. Wasting a few seconds did not matter at all. She had definitely used the perfume, so all she needed to do now was speak—

"Uh~ Hello everyone, I am the final contestant, my name is—!"

"Kyah~!" "Wait... What is going on!?" "Kyah! Seriously!"

Just as Laurica started her speech, for some reason—

A sudden violent gale blew towards the stage from below, where the students were.

Laurica felt a sweet fragrance fill her nostrils. It was the scent of the perfume she had poured out.

(...W-Wait, how? Why?)

Laurica lost composure in shock. Impossible to believe. But she understood the cruel truth. The fragrance had not spread out.

This sudden gust of wind had prevented the bewitching fragrance from drifting towards the boys to obtain the votes she needed!

So, this meant a bid for victory through true merit? Using the performance so far and the speech she was about to make, an open bid for victory?

No choice but to defeat her?

Laurica felt almost all strength drain from below her knees, almost collapsing on the spot.

Despite knowing that she must not think these words, she could not prevent the sentence from surfacing in her mind.

—How could I possibly defeat her?

"You—! What the heck are you doing——! I'm gonna hurt you, I'm gonna give you merciless and extremely terrifying punishment right now!"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, because this is necessary, you know~ Just in case, one more time."

Another gust of violent wind. An extraordinary whirlwind was blowing inside the gym. On stage, the girls were all shrieking while holding down their skirts while the boys watching this scene from below were leaning forward in a clamor.

About to deliver a speech was the final contestant—in other words, Chihaya's classmate. Kagidou Himeno was simply standing there blankly

on stage, making no effort to hold down the skirt that was being blown upwards by the wind. Chihaya could not help but think, surely she must have supplied countless boys with food for thought for their activities tonight.

Next to Himeno, Shiraho was currently holding down her skirt, casting a cold gaze towards Chihaya as though asking: "...What on earth are you two trying to do?" I must explain to her as soon as she comes down from the stage—Chihaya found it a little troubling that she was actually looking forward to it for some reason. Even if it was a chance to converse, the other person would very likely be angry. Chihaya wondered if this was some kind of perverted desire. As a side note, the maid kept waving her hands and yelling as though praising a goalkeeper who had successfully blocked a penalty kick: "What what? Is this a prank of fairies!? But as expected of Shiraho, nice block!" Chihaya thought to herself: I've lost to her in all sorts of ways.

"So... Kagidou Himeno-san? Speech time has already started... Are you okay?"

Instead of answering the host's question, Himeno continued to stand there spacing out without saying a word, wasting the allotted time. No one could tell if she was too nervous or had given up on the contest. In any case, the victor was decided with that.

After all the contestants finished the speeches, it was finally time to vote. Everyone received a ballot where all they had to do was write in the name of the person they picked. The rules were very simple.

The executive committee members also started handing out ballots to the students in the standby area. No need to hurry.

Chihaya paid attention to the door connecting the side of the stage to the main standby area, waiting for Shiraho to return. However, the first person to rush out, faster than anyone else, turned out to be Himeno instead. She even rushed out of the secondary standby area, running off to unknown whereabouts—so fast that no one wanted to try stopping her.

Chihaya could not help but think: Was getting her panties seen by others such a great shock?

Crushed sunglasses. Naturally, bones were probably crushed as well. Probably during an attempt to engage in pointless defense in that very instant, the man's arms were bent like those of a wrecked doll. So ugly that she could not help but laugh out loud. The metal club's spikes had pierced his flesh, causing a certain color to spread out on the ground, one that ought to come from this man only. The remains of the two bayonets were also stained by the same color. Hanging on his neck, the camera was also flattened with glass lenses and small components scattered on the ground.

Best that all be crushed. Best that all be crushed even more. Were his lungs flattened? Was his belly flattened? Was his crotch flattened? If not, then continue to exert more force. Crush. Indeed, crush, crush.

This man's fortune was not bad, apparently. He was still alive. Fear could feel the pain all over her body finally subsiding. Moving forward slowly on her knees, she approached Neto. Her lips curled into a grin for no reason.

(Aha—H-Ha.)

Her mind was hazy and chaotic. Only a vast and ambiguous sense of omnipotence was dancing inside.

Serves you right, look. Still alive. Kill him. Killing him would be too merciful. She possessed the power to kill him. Right now, she was capable of anything. The weight in both her hands announced this fact. Strike. Lock him away in the «Iron Coffin of Lissa», then use the «Morgenstern» to hammer viciously from above, causing him to go mad from the echoes and the impacts. Or make him sit in the «German Interrogation Chair» then force him to watch «The Pendulum»'s blade swing towards him. That scene might be nice. Cut. Will this guy go incontinent? Will he beg her to spare his life in an unsightly manner? How she wished to hear it. How she wished to hear it right now. Hang him. Disgrace him. Bind up—Ahhh, such a dilemma. If only he could be made to sit on the «Judas Cradle», then tear his back open with the «Cat's Paw», then reward him by placing him on top of the «Inquisitional Wheel», using «The Teeth» to play with him would be nice. Actually, there was much more that she was originally capable of. Clearly infinitely many more. But now there was no way. How unsatisfying. Then let's start using two instances of «A Hatchet of Lingchi» to play a game of verifying the lengths of both arms. Shave. Definitely awesome. Definitely a fun game. Hence, Fear transformed the cubes, wielding a hatchet in each hand, slowly approaching Neto—

"Fear... That's... enough."

"It's... over. It's all over—Hurry and wake up. Hurry and wake up, Fear! Hey!"

Just as she tried to swing a hatchet, she felt resistance. A Japanese sword in a black scabbard was pressing on the hatchet. Usually bearing a stupid look, his face was currently very serious, watching her as though worried about something.

Her consciousness was gradually strung back together. She felt double the weight from both hands. The dark sense of omnipotence, whose birth was guided by the double measure of violent impulses occupying her heart, gradually dissipated from her mind.

"I-I know... Okay!"

Recover now. Don't forget. Myself... Myself here is different from my past self.

Fear turned the torture tools carried in both hands back to Rubik's cubes at the same time. One cube was found in the cupboard of the Yachi home. The other was bought by Yume in hopes of connecting with Fear.

Fear closed her eyes. Lingering in her body was a sense of fatigue and weariness, as well as the final remnants of the disappearing pain.

There was also an irredeemable... sense of emptiness and despair—

"You... What happened to that woman? Did you guys defeat her?"

"We left her to the others for now. Everyone just reunited with us."

Fear asked, trying to escape from reality. Haruaki answered. "The others" probably consisted of those Fear could guess. Several shrine maidens, Kirika and Kuroe, Zenon and Ganon, plus for some reason, Un Izoey.

Just as Haruaki said, they were currently engaged with Lilyhowell in battle.

"Wha... Yah!?" "—!"

Ganon and Un Izoey both staggered and retreated at the same time. In front of them, certain glittering objects could be seen falling and scattering. The fragments of blades. The remains of Ganon's sword and the knife Un Izoey wielded in her foot.

Amidst this glittering light, Lilyhowell stared ahead intently, swinging the greatsword called the «Wathe Breaker». As her cape fluttered up, the

blade's whiteness further accentuated the pure whiteness of her knightly attire.

"Crap, she broke it...!"

"My comment: concluding she is quite a powerful master. Although beasts have successfully escaped me in the past, never has any beast ever broken my knife with their teeth, I remember this kind of memory."

Although her eyes showed no fluctuation in emotion, Un Izoey whispered softly with some admiration in tone. Continuing to stare at the enemy, she drew out a prepared weapon from under her skirt (considering the space, perhaps it was under her panties as well).

Without a weapon, Ganon simply raised both arms in a surrendering pose. Meanwhile, Zenon threw knives from the side. Kirika and Kuroe also extended the «Tragic Black River» and hair respectively. However, Lilyhowell turned her body like a tornado, repelling all attacks while severing the belt and the hair.

"How absolutely ridiculous in strength... But if anything, she seems like the type to focus more on defense than offense. Under such circumstances, there should be many ways to break through the defense."

"Because the disadvantage in numbers is too great. You have no chance of winning. Why don't you give up and surrender?"

Lilyhowell seemed to exhale lightly but her cheerless expression remained the same.

"No chance of winning... huh? Deceived by the enemy, the plan is exposed, even the plan's core is smashed, the subordinates are lying collapsed, leaving only the leader. Then—as a knight, what ought to be the correct decision at a time like this?"

"I suggest you toss your greatsword aside and surrender."

Hearing Kuroe's words, Lilyhowell nodded slightly and gripped her greatsword more tightly.

"—Indeed, I must fight to the very end against overwhelming odds until my strength is exhausted."

"Muu, completely ignored."

Still holding the Rubik's cubes in both hands, Fear stood up, using Haruaki's extended hand for support. Next, she approached Lilyhowell slowly together with Haruaki who was holding the Japanese sword. Fight until her strength was exhausted? In that case, Fear decided to be her opponent until Lilyhowell's strength was exhausted. But at this moment—

"Huff! A-Ahhh... Huff...!"

A girl in school uniform ran towards Lilyhowell, jumping into her bosom as though trying to knock her over. She looked quite familiar. Wasn't she one of the first-year girls who were still taking part in the school beauty pageant just now? She was also Chihaya and Yume's classmate. In other words, this girl was the auxiliary from the Knights' Dominion who had infiltrated the school beauty pageant. Lilyhowell gazed down at the girl in surprise.

"Laurica, why..."

"S-Sorry... I am so sorry, I... am too... useless. I could not accomplish the mission... I failed, but the failure belongs to me alone, not you, Lilyhowell-sama—! So... Don't! Absolutely don't!"

Lilyhowell's elegant eyebrows were frowning as she narrowed her eyes and looked at Laurica who was sobbing against her neck. After remaining still for several seconds, Lilyhowell repeated inhaling and exhaling a couple times, then—

"I take back what I said. The correct action that a knight ought to take now... is this instead!"

While murmuring softly, Lilyhowell suddenly turned around and started a mad dash without looking back—She fled.

The unexpected behavior caught everyone unprepared. The group could only stare blankly at her back. But among them only one person took action, the girl who knew better than anyone else how to handle escaping prey.

Un Izoey instantly stretched out the elastic from her toe, crouching down on the spot, using her legs as a firing mechanism to form an elastic bow in a marvelous display of balance. A number of darts were shot at high speed like arrows.

Lilyhowell simply turned her body to shield the female student held in her arms against her chest. Two or three darts were deflected by her «Wathe

Breaker» and armor but one of them burrowed into her shoulder. She frowned slightly but did not stop. After cutting across the sports ground, she ran straight for the wall.

"W-What should we do...?"

"As much as I'd like to say, just let her run if she wants to run, we have to make her clean up the aftermath, after all the absolutely ridiculous things they've done!"

"Just letting those two escape like this, in the end, it's still... too merciful. Haruaki-kun, could you please run a little! Perhaps we might be able to catch up to them!"

Fear gritted her teeth and started taking steps to chase after Lilyhowell and Laurica. But in that very instant—

"«Geist»! «Geist»! «Polter»—«Geist»!"

"What!?"

Crash crash crash! Falling down from the sky, timber and brooms crashed into the ground before them, forming a row like a fence, blocking their path. Everyone looked up to search for the source where these objects were shot from, almost vertically—

"Satsuko and... Fourteen...!"

At the same time, two figures had also jumped down from the top of the school building. Satsuko had her hair styled into buns as usual while wearing this school's uniform. Fourteen had her face covered by the veil as seen before while dressed in combat attire with her chest bound in sarashi cloth. The two of them landed next to the fallen Yume.

Satsuko narrowed her eyes, bowing her head to look at Yume as though expressing forlornness, sorrow and mourning.

"Hiwatari Yume-san, Ontenzaki Satsuko saw everything. Thank you for your hard work... Four."

"—I will not call this cleaning up. I will treat her as an honored guest who has completed the trials towards becoming a dragon, welcoming her inside."

Fourteen knelt down and covered Yume's body lightly with her cape. When she stood up again, Yume could not be seen lying on the ground any more. She was probably moved into the body of Fourteen the "house."

"You two... must have known from the start! Whether Yume! Or «Knight Killer» Nirushaaki! What 'hoping we could save her'... You... You... Tricked us again! Just like last time, you really are the worst kind of liar!"

Fear clenched her fists and yelled. In the end, this was another of the Draconians' inane strategies. What strength, what «Nest Parasitoid», all because of such things, Yume was—

Under Fear's cursing gaze, Satsuko smiled helplessly as though apologetically. For some reason, Fear even got the impression that she had no choice.

"This time is slightly different from last time... Yeah, but no matter what Satsuko says, you guys probably won't believe Satsuko. Someone like Satsuko, no matter how much you hate her, it's fine. Fear-san, if you don't mind, please keep this resentment with you to fight Satsuko next time."

"Utterly nonsensical. That's right, everything is nonsensical!"

"Yes, there are still things we don't understand. You undertook this operation to make us fight the Knights' Dominion, right? Then why—Why did you stop us now and assist the Knights' Dominion instead?"

"Because Satsuko has many difficult circumstances. Oh, looks like they escaped safely. Thank goodness."

Saying that, Satsuko pointed behind them. In other words, towards the wall.

While they were held up by Fourteen's restraining attack, Lilyhowell had scaled the wall while carrying the girl. Throwing a glance at Haruaki's group behind her, she frowned slightly and finally sheathed the «Wathe Breaker» before leaping down the other side of the wall.

Satsuko had probably pointed towards Lilyhowell as a diversion. By the time Fear and the rest turned their gazes back, Satsuko and Fourteen had already used the momentary opportunity to disappear. Their presence could not be sensed anywhere.

For what reason? And for whom? Which side should they chase? Unable to find these answers, everyone was simply rooted firmly to the ground, unable to advance to the next question.

Only a world of silence remained.

A world containing only things that were lost and things that were left behind.

Most likely because the votes had been tallied for the school beauty pageant and it was time for the results to be announced...

Cheering could be heard faintly from the direction of the gym.

For the sake of welcoming new students—

For the sake of blessing the new students, hoping that their futures would turn out slightly more wonderful than imagined, this festival—

Concluded.

Epilogue

Part 1

Laurica and Lilyhowell had stopped in a deserted alleyway. Had they escaped successfully?

"That girl just now, I remember she is the «Tailender Syndrome»... Satsuko Ontenzaki, yes? I recall seeing her photo in the resources at the Knights' Dominion. Judging from the timing of her appearance, she is possibly our informant. However, in that case, why did she assist our escape...?"

"Lilyhowell-sama! Now is not the time for thinking about these things, umm, your wound...!"

"This? Do not worry, pay no heed to it."

Lilyhowell frowned while looking down at the dart piercing her shoulder and answered. She left it alone probably because she had concluded that the bleeding would worsen if the dart was pulled out. But Laurica was very anxious and wanted to remove it for her and start treatment as soon as possible. However—this must be done after moving to a relatively safe location.

Laurica recalled in her mind the map of this town that was carved deeply into her mind. A safe hiding place where treatment could be carried out. There were a number of candidate locations. After picking the one closest to their current position, Laurica looked up.

Instantly, Lilyhowell also looked up but for a completely different reason from Laurica's.

Staring wide-eyed, she was looking in shock at the direction behind Laurica.

How could this be possible? Laurica wondered. Impossible. Unbelievable. Even if injured, how could someone like Lilyhowell-sama be so intimidated by the other person's presence that she was immobilized—

"—Overall, things have proceeded according to plan."

The voice was coming from behind. Laurica was unable to turn her head back. Cold sweat broke out all over her body. Was it only cold sweat? She

could not even move her gaze to check. Perhaps she had even wet herself without noticing.

Moving recklessly would undoubtedly mean... death.

Laurica understood only this.

"What... You... No way—!"

"The name you imagine is most likely the correct guess. Although my clan has no family name to begin with."

A voice that sounded familiar yet heard for the first time. Completely lacking in emotional fluctuation, there was neither anxiety, bafflement, even excitement, nor any other emotion, the person behind her answered calmly.

What was her true identity? The most likely person to appear this instant was—

"«Battle Demon» and «Knight Killer»—Nirushaaki!"

How? Why?

Laurica's questions could not form words. She could do nothing but remain in daze, sensing the presence behind her.

"Laurica! Retreat now...!"

Sorry, I can't move at all.

She could see Lilyhowell grit her teeth while drawing the «Wathe Breaker».

"I am a knight from the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion—Lilyhowell Kilmister! I have come to avenge the comrades whose lives you have taken!"

Lilyhowell closed in rapidly, first moving past Laurica's side then rushing towards Nirushaaki behind her—However, Lilyhowell did not manage to pass through and stopped midway.

"Ah...!"

She stopped with her nose directed towards Laurica's neck, glaring at the person behind Laurica's back. Her quickened breathing blew at Laurica's

earlobe. Laurica recalled Lilyhowell's body warmth. The stench of blood entered her nose. She did not wish to smell this odor.

Right beside her, beneath her underarm, something was gushing out. Something had happened to Lilyhowell's body. Laurica remained immobile.

"Promising talent. However, you are not my target this time."

Something beside her, the arm or the weapon of the person behind moved, sending Lilyhowell's body flying. Despite lying sprawled on the ground, Lilyhowell still used the «Wathe Breaker» as support, mustering all her strength trying to stand up. Laurica did not wish to see the color on her abdomen.

"Quite obedient and quiet of you. My target is easy."

What did she mean by the easy target? When the person behind started searching the pockets of her uniform, Laurica finally realized in shock.

(The target... could it be... me...?)

"Do not be ridiculous. This child is nothing more than an auxiliary... Do not target her!"

"Nothing more? If she did not possess the tool that I desire and simultaneously carry the trait of changing her face from time to time, impossible to track down, perhaps she really might be very ordinary."

Lilyhowell was kneeling unsteadily, groaning with her face in alarm.

"What are... you saying—Could it be, all of this, was for this purpose—"

"Precisely so. Using Neto the Avenger, who holds a grudge against me, to indirectly draw out his auxiliary, in other words, this girl. Then hitching a free ride on the utterly foolish 'Nest Parasitoid' plan concocted by Number One, I allowed Hiwatari Yume to put on a show, taking on my identity to exist as a student. Then I ordered her to get closer to Fear-in-Cube, and made use of the «Tailender Syndrome» to force Fear-in-Cube's faction to battle the Knights' Dominion. All that was for the sake of this result—the Knights' Dominion will meet defeat and retreat in a manner where the auxiliary's identity is obvious. Only under such conditions could I create the chance to capture—And in fact, I have captured you."

Ah, from the start... They were meant to be met with defeat. Not allowed to win nor be captured after defeat. Instead, not only did they have to lose but the two of them had to escape while supporting each other.

Hence, that was why the Draconians' «Tailender Syndrome» and Fourteen Coonsberry assisted their escape just now. By now, Laurica finally understood.

"Is this it? This is «Bartolomey Oblivion», the Wathe mask capable of erasing memories."

Drawn out from her pocket was one of the "trash" in her possession. A tool that was contemptible, terrifying and filthy, possibly useful but actually useless. This was what Nirushaaki wanted? For this sort of thing, she had played them all to dance on the palm of her hand?

For this sort of thing—the one she idolized was currently covered in blood, desperately trying to stand up?

"What do you want... to use it for...!?"

"You have no need to know."

The presence behind her seemed to move slightly. Laurica trembled in fear. Because she knew what this person was going to do next, what this person wanted to do next.

"You deceived us, the Knights' Dominion—and even toyed with us! Nirushaaki!"

"Ludicrous... You were only toyed with because you are too weak! You are not worthy of becoming dragons!"

Laurica could see Lilyhowell committing her entire willpower to stand up then step forward again. In reaction, the presence behind Laurica could be sensed taking action.

Just as Laurica remembered what she should be doing—

Her mental restraints were released and her legs started moving. Then she heard a blunt and wet noise from her abdomen.

"Ga... Huff!"

"Laurica...! Idiot, what are you doing...!?"

Unlike earlier, Lilyhowell's voice was coming from behind her this time. What a failure... Laurica thought. Had she taken the attack with her back, she would then be able to see her idol's face for the remaining time.

But since she was looking straight ahead, so be it. She had no other choice, completely unhesitating, only doing what she ought to do. Laurica glared at the contemptible enemy while using her hands to clutch the object that was skewering her abdomen.

"Don't think... you'll succeed...! I absolutely refuse... to let you... kill Lilyhowell-sama...!"

"Excessively meaningless. Although the force was reduced, my attack still pierced you and harmed her."

Now these words were truly meaningless. The force was reduced? So long as the damage was reduced, that was enough. She had completed her task fully. She.. was also able to do something so amazing.

"How odd. A mere auxiliary—Why go so far?"

"Because..."

A lumpy mass, filled with the stench of blood, surged up from the depths of her throat. After spitting it at the enemy, Laurica continued:

"—Because! Lilyhowell-sama is the only one who has never called me 'Trash,' not even once! So... I... only when in front of her... am not 'Trash.' I can be something not 'Trash'! If I don't do anything at this time... If I'm unable to do anything at all... Then that would become a lie—I don't want Lilyhowell-sama to become a liar!"

Behind her, the one she idolized called out her name. The sensation of the cape and the armor. Only now did Laurica realize that the two of them were almost stuck together. Because the great hole in her abdomen felt too scorching, she was unable to sense it.

I'm fine, please don't make that kind of sound. Please don't groan in such pain. The Lilyhowell-sama I know is the strongest. Strong and gentle and dignified with righteousness. Even in this state, you will surely win next. You are different from me, the one idolizing you. You are far stronger than me and cannot possibly lose. You are the knight of knights, my savior. A true knight, capable of saving others. That's why you saved me in the past.

Because you are a knight, my life was able to exist. My life is proof that you are a knight. So, so—please take and use it.

Allow my life that belongs to you to be useful. Live on.

Please. With this, I will be so happy that I could fly.

Because my dream has been realized.

Finally, I have truly succeeded in becoming someone other than trash—

...She looked down at the two people collapsed in a pool of blood with their eyes closed.

The dead girl and the half-dead knight.

"I have obtained the targeted item. All else is trivial."

Killing a half-dead person was easy. At least compared to killing a dead person. However, because this was something trivial, she decided not to bother. In their hearts, there existed the concept of always prioritizing what was number one at all times.

"Helplessness, anger, love, shame, curse, desire, revenge... Perhaps due to my actions, you may become even stronger. I shall spare your life to allow you to become food for letting me get closer to becoming a dragon. However, when the time comes to encounter you again—"

She chuckled a few times lightly.

While using her fingers to play with the mask she had obtained, she spoke cheerfully:

"Perhaps I have already become a dragon. Perhaps you might become the first sacrifice to be eaten by the dragon. Precisely for the sake of surpassing Number One, to continue progressing—precisely because I wish to obtain the strongest weapon most suited to me in order to surpass him, that is why I wanted this tool here."

Part 2

Without any warning, Fear suddenly wanted to calm down to think properly and was in no mood to concentrate in class at all. Hence, she walked

unsteadily, swaying this way and that, trying to find a suitable place to think, she finally reached the usual location.

"Skipping class is not good~ See!"

"...I have a stomachache, so I came to seek refuge here as an emergency. I'll feel much better after drinking some nourishing herbal tea to warm my stomach. So I have to drink it. Yes, just pretend it's that."

"Fufu, then I will pretend that's the case! After all, this rarely happens. As a perfect maid, I'm also very kind and will turn a blind eye to your occasional need for a break~ So, Fear-chan, the tea is coming—Awawawa!"

Fear frantically rescued the cup that was wobbling on the edge of Sovereignty's tray then reached out carefully with both hands to steady the one who almost fell over. Finally, she enjoyed the taste and aroma of the black tea.

Dressed in a maid outfit, Sovereignty also sat herself on the sofa opposite to Fear, holding her own personal cup. It looked like she was having her break time as well.

The master of this room—the superintendent—was not present. Zenon was apparently organizing files and materials in the adjacent room. Inside the superintendent's office, only Fear, Sovereignty and the faint fragrance of tea were present.

Fear pondered many things, recalling many things. Things that happened several days ago. Things that happened during the welcoming festival. Every time, her hand would naturally move and rub her cheek.

Seeing that, Sovereignty held her teacup with both hands and asked in a gentle voice:

"Does it still hurt?"

"It's not hurting... But sometimes it feels like it hurts. Well, I guess this will continue to hurt."

She recalled the slap her cheek had suffered.

The girl was an inhabitant of this world. A human staying in this place, following goals, plans and orders. In spite of that, I got her involved, she who was unrelated to all those secret matters, a girl who only needed me to be "the first friend who talked to her after she became a first-year high

school student"—That's all I can think. Putting aside legitimacy and grand principles, if I don't deliver a vicious blow to this helpless tool of torture and execution that's in the center of everything, I can't vent my anger.

Putting down the teacup, Fear reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out that object. Not her own but the toy cube that she had borrowed from the girl.

Click, click.

Without hurrying, Fear poured time into the task, as though savoring every step, she solved the Rubik's cube.

After completing, she randomly swiveled it a few times to mess up the colors. Then once again, the clicking and turning began. Even though she was now capable of solving the Rubik's cube, in the end, this entertainment was still endless.

"...When you solved the Rubik's cube successfully, Fear-chan, that child was so happy."

"Really?"

"I was by her side and saw clearly. That child really supported you, Fear-chan, and you worked hard to obtain success, so she was very happy... Yes, the scene at the time was quite supportive. Judging from the enthusiasm, you could very well have taken first place."

Sovereignty spoke while using gentle eyes to watch Fear turning the cube. Fear chuckled.

"Are you making fun of me? That's totally giving indirect praise to the girl who actually won first place. You could call it showing off."

"Oh dear~ That's neither here nor there! Fear-chan, you're so bad!"

Sovereignty suddenly made a look as though remembering something.

"Hey, Fear-chan... Although it's a bit late to ask now, do you want to get first place?"

"If I don't get first place, the enemy's plan can't be stopped, right..."

"I don't mean in that way but other ways."

Fear decided that playing dumb with Sovereignty was meaningless. But to be honest—

"...I don't know. I find it quite unbelievable myself but I really don't know. Why do I feel so reluctant to lose against Cow Tits or Kirika? Why do I want to win as a woman, to make him recognize that I'm great as a woman—"

"You wish for someone to recognize you? Ah, that goes without saying~"

"Muu." Fear pouted silently. Sovereignty was resting her elbows on her thighs while supporting her chin with both hands. Staring at Fear, her eyes looked like she was watching something comforting and delightful.

"I feel that you actually know everything, Fear-chan."

"Of course not..."

"Because I'm me, I can feel vaguely that the situation is starting to develop subtly. Someone started being serious a long time ago while someone else decided to start getting serious. Although I know I shouldn't blurt out or interfere, at least I believe that it would be too lonely if things had gone too far to change or victory was decided before you even noticed."

Sovereignty was speaking solemnly in a rare moment. But of course, Fear was unable to understand her properly. All she could manage was imagine roughly what Sovereignty was talking about.

"You're referring to that matter—the one we discussed back when we first met?"

"About being able to drain something or not? I won't say the answer. However, I think I can give a hint now at least. The answers for now and back then should be the same—This answer is the hint."

Fear placed the Rubik's cube on her thigh and reached for the almost empty teacup, then took a sip.

She felt heat in the depths of her chest. Due to the tea's warmth as well as a certain reason apart from that.

Inside her heart, did that type of emotion exist?

Not human. Cursed. Steeped in sin. A tool of torture and execution. Someone like her would have that in her heart?

—Feelings of romantic love for someone.

In the depths of her heart, the warmth was carried by blood flow, transporting all sorts of feelings to the entire body. Unease, anticipation, joy, terror, anxiety, doubt. Indeed, what finally dominated her entire body was doubt.

Could that type of emotion actually reside in her body for real?

Those emotions were positive. Nothing wrong about them. Anyone would wish for them.

Nevertheless, she herself was negative. She was wrong. Anyone would stay away from her.

In this incident, it had been very dangerous again. Fear bowed her head and glanced at the Rubik's cube on her thigh.

Dual Emulation. A new method of fighting. It was all fine and good that she managed to defeat Neto after discovering this new method of fighting—However, she was almost devoured by cold merciless cruelty as a result.

To be honest, she was very afraid. Afraid of herself, afraid of that power, afraid of her past.

She had always felt terror since a long time ago. But today, Fear wondered in her heart with unprecedented intensity:

—So, what should I do?

Posing a question for herself to answer, Fear gently stroked her lower abdomen. The past was not going to vanish. However, she was able to erase powers that symbolized her past self. Indeed, that was all she could do currently.

The Indulgence Disk retrieved from the remains of Neto's cursed camera, «The Paingrapher», had already been inserted personally by Haruaki into her depths, sealing away the «Flower Sword Verazella». Fear had already tried it out, even when using the second emulated cube, she was still unable to access forms that were sealed away by inserted Indulgence Disks.

In the end, that meant that the importance of Indulgence Disks remained unchanged. The key towards sealing her powers. This hand would drag

out her contemptible past the moment she let down her guard, hence this sort of stone weight and shackles were needed. In order to become an ordinary human, this key was more important than anything else.

So far, she had believed so. However, now that she noticed those feelings that might exist inside her, those feelings that she did not know if they could exist or not—

In order to hold her head high and stick her chest out proudly to declare that she possessed those feelings—

She believed that the Indulgence Disks were absolutely needed.

Hence, Fear decided what she must do from now on.

"Hey Sovereignty... When the superintendent returns, I've got a something I'd like you to help convey to him. Although he might not agree to it, asking wouldn't hurt. Because he's the most likely person around me."

"So you want me to pass along a message? Sure, what do you want to ask?"

No longer passive like the way she was so far but turning active instead.

Start taking action.

In order to be able to hold my head high sooner—

And confidently say that I am in love.

"I want to get more Indulgence Disks, even a single one would be good. From anywhere, anyone... No matter what, please help me ask if he has any leads."

With this, surely compared to the future as an ordinary human that she had always hoped for until now, the future that she had always considered sufficient, would be one that was slightly more greedy, slightly more extravagant—

In other words, a future slightly more wonderful than originally envisioned.

Afterword

Hello again, I am Minase Hazuki! Presenting to everyone C³ XI (Volume 11)! Although there were other series in the mean time, due to various reasons, roughly half a year has passed since the previous installment. I am really so sorry...!

In this volume, Haruaki and friends have advanced to their second year of high school. Throughout the series, approximately half a year has elapsed from Volume 1 till now. It feels so fast yet so slow at the same time. Well then, this volume's new characters include a blonde, straitlaced, airheaded, cool beauty boobs (I'm getting incomprehensible here), with even someone baring their upper torso completely, exposing nipples or something salacious! Those who haven't read the story yet, please look forward to it! ...So, although there's no relation to the previous intense statements, the new male character feels like his appearance has been long-awaited.

So! Definitely, maybe, probably, if there are no problems, if the entire undertaking isn't an elaborate and monumental prank... It must be written on this volume's book band as well!

Basically, the C³ series is going to be animated! Hee~ haw~! Speaking of anime, of course, Fear, Konoha and Kirika will be moving around, speaking, shameless this and violence that. I am starting to get all sorts of fantasies now as well, unable to stop laughing to myself. In actual fact, it seems like it will take some time before the series airs, so please show your support when the time comes!

Also, it's actually not just anime but C³ is also getting a manga adaptation. The manga has already started serializing in Monthly Comic Dengeki Daioh. The manga artist is Akina Tsukako-sama. I'm thinking that Fear and the girls will surely raise commotions in manga panels as well. So yeah, if you're interested, please check out C³'s manga version as well!

Finally, let's have some acknowledgements.

Illustrator Sasorigatame-sama, thank you very much for drawing such beautiful illustrations again! I'm quite certain that without the power of Sasorigatame-sama's illustrations, a media franchise never would have gotten off the ground like now... It's a bit late to say this, but please allow me to say once again: Thank you so much for designing Fear and the

others! I continue to be in your care! Also, editor in charge, Yuasa-sama, due to the media franchise production, I will probably be causing you incessant trouble from now one. Hopefully, I'll be able to adhere to deadlines firmly and not add extra burdens for you! ...I want to make this my goal for this year, but as for whether it'll be realized or not... Cough cough. Anyway, I will try my best!

Then most important of all, I would like to thank all of you readers. Only with every reader's support was it possible for C³ to be adapted into manga and anime, growing and developing much more than I anticipated. I truly thank everyone from the bottom of my heart! I hope all of you, dear readers, can continue to stay with Fear and the others into the future!

Well then, I hope I can see everyone again with the next volume. I'm also slated to publish short stories in Dengeki Bunko Magazine, so coming next should be C³ XII as usual~

Minase Hazuki

References

1. ↑ Nattou(納豆): a type of traditional Japanese food made from fermented soybeans. Due to its slimy texture and strong smell and taste, it can be somewhat of an acquired taste.<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natt%C5%8D>
2. ↑ Mysterious sea(玄海) is read as genkai which is also the pronunciation for limit(限界). Nelson(ネルソン) is probably some kind of corrupted form of the verb to sleep(nemuru). In short, Fear was trying to say "I'm at my limit. It's about time I slept" or something like that.
3. ↑ Kotatsu(炬燵): is a low, wooden table frame covered by a futon, or heavy blanket, upon which a table top sits. Underneath is a heat source, often built into the table itself. Kotatsu are used almost exclusively in Japan, although similar devices are used elsewhere.<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kotatsu>
4. ↑ 魔法焦女☆まじかる・ インフェルのん: the kanji for magical scorching girl(魔法焦女) is a pun that is pronounced mahou shoujo just like the usual magical girl(魔法少女).

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Generated on Wed Jan 22 13:23:58 2014